

## **Zoning Versus Planning in Manhattanville**

**by Tom Angotti**

**23 Jun 2006**

The New York press is flooded with stories and [editorials](#) about the fight over Columbia University's expansion plans, but most accounts ignore a key part of the story. Unlike the opponents who successfully fought Columbia's 1968 plan to build a gym in Morningside Heights, today's community residents and students, while they too protest Columbia's proposals, have their own plan for the area.

Columbia [proposes](#) to build 17 acres worth of campus in the Manhattanville area of West Harlem. The university would develop about seven million square feet of building space. The \$7.4 billion project would take 25 to 30 years to complete and, according to [Columbia](#), result in 2,000 construction jobs and another 9,000 permanent jobs. The project includes rezoning 35 acres and displacing some 400 people and 1,600 jobs.

Columbia has made much of its [willingness](#) to listen to and meet with community residents and businesses, to help relocate those displaced, and to mobilize their signature architect, Renzo Piano, to design a new campus that is more inviting to the community. Piano's designs purport to open up the new campus to the street grid, promote ground floor retail, and generally create quality urban space instead of a campus enclave.

But other people – in the community, on campus and elsewhere – see a future for the area that includes a different kind of Columbia expansion – and much more than the university's plan to rezone the area to spur new growth.

## **The Community Plan**

After scores of community meetings, Manhattan Community Board 9, which includes West Harlem, put together their own [vision](#) of the future. Drawn up with the help of the Pratt Institute Center for Community Development and the Department of City Planning, the plan was submitted to the City Planning Commission in the fall of 2005, at the same time the commission saw Columbia's proposals to rezone the area. The commission ruled that the community plan met minimal requirements for consideration under Section 197-a of the City Charter. This provision allows community boards to do their own plans and submit them for official approval by the borough president, planning commission and City Council.

The community's broad-ranging 197-a plan differs from Columbia's rezoning scheme in several ways. The community plan includes, but is not limited to, rezoning the area so that Columbia can expand. The plan calls for preservation of existing housing and businesses as well as new development in keeping with the existing built environment. It would protect and expand low cost housing. Instead of eliminating industrial and auto-related activities, the mixed-use character of the neighborhood would be expanded. Redevelopment would be achieved without the use of eminent domain to force existing owners and tenants to leave. And any rezoning would be done to help implement the community plan, whereas Columbia's rezoning proposal reflects mainly its own development needs.

While Columbia's proposals for rezoning leaves the future of the neighborhood to the vagaries of the real estate market, the community plan calls for a different kind of development that would shape instead of succumb to the market. This would include limiting the amount and scale of new residential development. The community plan favors the use of innovative green or environmentally friendly building technology, zero waste development, and proposes specific measures to improve the quality of the environment. This responds, in part, to community concerns about Columbia's plans to build a biotech facility that could pose risks to community health. The plan also calls for expanded social services for those in the community so that neighborhood residents get services on a par with Columbia's student services.

Columbia's rezoning plan would allow the university to pursue its expansion plans, but create uncertainty for the rest of the neighborhood. The proposed rezoning from manufacturing to residential and institutional uses will increase land prices and rents, feeding neighborhood concerns about displacement and gentrification. The phenomenon has already had effects in other parts of Harlem, creating concern among people with modest

incomes about whether they will be being able to stay in their neighborhoods.

Columbia President Lee Bollinger has been adamant that his vision of the university's future requires that Columbia build on the entire tract of land between 125th and 133rd Streets. Nearby residents have a role he said – but should not be all powerful. "We are trying to do things that help the world more broadly. The community is not everything," he told the Times

Meanwhile, the City Planning Commission, the city's main decision-making body on planning and zoning, has looked at both the community plan and Columbia's zoning proposal and told both parties to "enter into a dialogue and make good faith efforts to achieve consensus." Some discussions are taking place but so far no one seems to have budged very much. Community representatives recently created a local development corporation that will negotiate a legally binding "community benefits agreement" with Columbia. Agreements like this can be useful when consensus can't be reached, but once those discussions start it is hard to imagine where the consensus will come from.

While the city's planning department worked closely with Columbia and the community to devise their respective proposals, the planning department and commission have stayed on the sidelines. This poses the risk that the planning commission could act hastily and without adequate information when the plans finally get submitted for their approval.

## Columbia's Iron Fist and Velvet Glove

According to some community activists, Columbia's relations with its neighbors had improved substantially until a few years ago. A decade ago, the university put together a working group involving a number of community representatives to explore options for the school's expansion. The university's administration worked quietly to develop trust and partnerships with local groups and activists.

Then a couple of years ago the velvet gloves came off. As if to remind everyone that, in any partnership, Columbia would always be the senior partner, the school's administration floated the idea that, if they had to, they would get the Empire State Development Corporation to [condemn the property](#) needed for the university expansion. This provided a sharp reminder to all that Columbia had access to the pinnacles of government.

The threat of condemnation has often been called "planner's blight" because it can force owners to sell and businesses to close decades before anything new goes up on the site. Under Governor George Pataki, the state development corporation has let developers use the threat of eminent domain to force deals with local property owners and create the impression that nothing can be done to stop the development bulldozer (as in Brooklyn's Atlantic Yards, for example).

Despite the relatively good years of the 1990s, some community activists think Columbia never took community participation seriously. According to Nellie Bailey of the Coalition to Preserve Community, "Columbia created an image of engagement and their dialogue was not of substance. For years they have worked behind the scenes to push their agenda. They pressured business owners to sell and the city's housing agency to get rid of tenants."

Now, with the threat of condemnation facing them, residents worry they cannot be equal partners in the University's Community Advisory Committee. And it is not only residents: Columbia's own students have formed the Student Coalition on Expansion and Gentrification and [neighborhood residents](#) and businesses have come together in the [Coalition to Preserve Community](#). According to the student coalition, "we are unified in our commitment to continue to work and stand in solidarity with those most affected by the process of gentrification, and in our commitment to educate and mobilize the student body towards a goal of greater university accountability."

---

*Tom Angotti is Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College, City University of NY, editor of Progressive Planning Magazine, and a member of the Task Force on Community-based Planning.*

Gotham Gazette is brought to you by [Citizens Union Foundation](#). It is made possible by grants from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Altman Foundation, the Fund for the City of New York, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, New York Times Foundation, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark

Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and readers like you. Please consider making a [tax-deductible contribution](#).

Gotham Gazette - <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/landuse/20060623/12/1892>