

MANHATTANVILLE, MEET WEST HARLEM: AN URBAN FRONTIER

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I stand at the corner of Broadway and 128th Street. Overhead, the elevated Number 1 train rumbles by. Once this has passed, a ratcheting from the auto body shop to my left picks up the chorus. Then, the high-pitched beeping of a truck in reverse chimes in. The layers of noise are rich with urban industry and have more presence than actual people. I head west on 128th Street toward the Hudson River and into the neighborhood that is the site of Columbia University's proposed Manhattanville campus. I don't see any trees along the street. The gray sidewalk makes a ninety-degree angle with a warehouse building. The brick and concrete walls of this neighborhood are home to four hundred residents and roughly sixteen hundred jobs. Columbia University is proposing to develop a secondary campus on the seventeen-acre plot of land in West Harlem. It is a thirty-year expansion plan to "allow an elite but cramped university to build additional academic and residential buildings, including new facilities for its arts and business schools and dozens of modern science research labs it needs to keep pace with other Ivy League universities" (Williams). In addition to providing academic resources, the project is intended to weave the "university into the fabric of city life" (Columbia University Web site).

To develop the campus, most of the structures and people in the neighborhood will be displaced. Behind these walls is a community that has been sensitive to the threat of displacement since the 1960s, when the university was "purchasing apartment buildings all over Morningside Heights, displacing thousands of poor, mostly black and Puerto Rican residents" (Eviatar). This West Harlem neighborhood is the frontier of a gentrification movement sweeping through New York City and other American urban centers.

In his essay "Frontiers in American History and the Role of the Frontier Historian," Jack D. Forbes defines the concept of a frontier as "a meeting point where two forces come up against each other, whether they be groups of human beings or such vague things as civilization and wilderness or knowledge and potential knowledge . . . [and therefore] there can be no frontier without . . . a contact situation" (206). The Manhattanville project has created a meeting point where the Columbia community comes into contact with the West Harlem community. At this frontier there are two fundamental points of tension: one is a local concern and involves debates about the development process of the new campus; the other is relevant to developing urban areas all over America and involves gentrification and the displacement of low-income residents. By viewing expansion in America through a historical lens, this paper examines the Manhattanville project and the contemporary threat of gentrification. It illuminates the perspectives of the Columbia and West Harlem communities at the

Manhattanville frontier in an effort to understand the dynamics of the relationship at this “meeting point.”

The proposed Manhattanville campus is a result of Columbia’s efforts to remain a competitive Ivy League institution. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, Columbia President Lee Bollinger commented, “As knowledge grows and fields grow, we need more faculty, you need a certain scale.” He added, “Columbia has 194 square feet per student; Harvard boasts 368” (Eviatar). The Columbia community has argued that the new facilities will function as a place of intellectual and scientific development of benefit to society as a whole. In a 2007 *New York Times* article, Columbia spokeswoman La-Verna Fountain built on Bollinger’s comments, stating, “Columbia wants to work on the kinds of issues that impact humanity, like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease” (Lee). Columbia’s impetus for the Manhattanville campus stems from market pressures, but the project has the potential to generate contributions beyond self-interested financial gains. According to the Columbia community, the campus expansion can and should contribute to the development of a healthy society. The developmental logic of Columbia holds that expansion of its domain is related to societal advancement.

In an 1893 address before the American Historical Association in Chicago, Frederick Jackson Turner discussed the ideological relationship between expansion and a successful society. He provided an Anglo-American description of America’s western frontier during the 1890s and the societal implications of Manifest Destiny:

The peculiarity of the American institution is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people—to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life. (2)

Turner applauded America for “continually advancing [its] frontier line . . . this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (2). This perspective can help us understand the debate about the Manhattanville project by contextualizing the situation within the historical approach of the “American character” to growth. The Columbia administration’s motivations do not mimic Turner’s statement in regard to how the native community of West Harlem is viewed, nor does the Columbia community view West Harlem as a “wilderness” with “primitive economic and political conditions.” Columbia administrators argue, however, that the development of Manhattanville will advance societal progress as a whole. Turner argued that the expansion of the Western frontier helped solidify America’s national character and some areas of governmental policy:

“It is safe to say that the legislation with regard to land, tariff, and internal improvements . . . was conditioned on frontier ideas and needs” (27).

Columbia champions an ideology similar to Turner’s, in that expansion would allow the university to make medical advancements of benefit to society. Bollinger comments, “We [Columbia] need to have the property in order to build a campus . . . that’s able to do the kind of intellectual work that needs to be done.” He continues, “We cure disease and find cures, and we try to understand the world, and we educate people, and we are basically a public service institution” (*Columbia Spectator*). The relationship that Turner suggests—between expansion and societal development—is also prevalent in Columbia’s perspective. This is a relationship that has been the driving force of American urban growth since the settling of the Western frontier, as discussed by Turner, more than a century ago.

Forbes argues that the Turner approach to the frontier neglects the populations that already live in the area of desired expansion. He criticizes Turner’s account of the western frontier: “while undoubtedly serving a useful purpose within the frame work of Anglo-American nationalism, [Turner’s ideas are] essentially one-sided and ethnocentric. It is in effect looking at an inter-group contact situation entirely from the point of view of one of the interested participants” (Forbes 204-205). As we saw earlier, Forbes points out that any frontier frames two groups “in a contact situation.” Turner’s “one-sided” approach undermines this idea and overlooks the social dynamics present at a frontier. This criticism is not entirely applicable to Columbia’s approach to the Manhattanville project, as the university is well aware of the West Harlem community. However, the development of Manhattanville has been initiated by, designed for, and is largely beneficial to only one party, the Columbia community.

The West Harlem community’s inequality in the development project is exemplified by Columbia’s attempt to acquire the land. The university already owns over fifty percent of the seventeen-acre property, but needs to purchase the remaining buildings before it can develop the campus. There is a group of West Harlem property owners who refuse to sell to the university. The group is concerned that they will lose clientele if they have to relocate their businesses. Columbia has made clear that, if necessary, it will use eminent domain laws to acquire the rest of the land. Eminent domain allows the state to transfer property from one private owner to another. The residents of West Harlem question why the university insists on occupying all of the land in the proposed area. In a 2007 *New York Times* article, local resident Luisa Henriquez complained, “They want us out of here, they want it all. Columbia should work around us; they say everything is for the students. What about us?” (Lee).

Columbia President Bollinger counters that “if needed to fulfill our public service responsibility and if the state were willing to use eminent domain . . . it would be irresponsible to take it off the table” (*Columbia Spectator*). This standpoint raises Forbes’s concern that the traditional Turner-American approach to expansion can cause a one-sided expression of growth. West Harlem residents have opinions

concerning eminent domain, but the complexity of the situation and Columbia's dominant role serve to silence their voices.

The deeper source of tension at the Manhattanville frontier exceeds local concerns about the physical development of the campus. The Manhattanville project is symbolic of the gentrification process underway throughout Harlem. A 2002 *Columbia Spectator* article outlines the university's role in this process:

The recent influx of higher-income individuals [to the Harlem area] has given many landlords a reason to overturn rental regulations in favor of wealthier tenants, thus disadvantaging long-time low-income residents . . . Students represent a large portion of these new, higher-paying tenants . . . and Columbia's proximity makes this even more of a threat in Harlem than in other gentrified neighborhoods. (Johnson)

An influx of upper-middle-class students and staff threatens to displace lower-income local residents. The development of Manhattanville could become a new phase in an ongoing process that is destructive to the Harlem community's heritage. Local residents are aware that the new campus will drive up surrounding real estate values and jeopardize their ability to live in the area. At an August 2007 public hearing, Nellie Bailey of the Harlem Tenants Council argued:

Columbia University's expansion cannot be viewed in isolation from the overall gentrification of Harlem. . . . The masses of Blacks, especially the poor and working classes are exacerbated, angry, demoralized and put off. . . . [T]here is no political will from elected officials to provide a viable alternative to the powers-that-be including Columbia University's land grab that will permanently alter the ethnic, socio-economic and political demographics of West Harlem, and by extension the greater community of Harlem. (NBPC website)

Bailey articulates the local community's fear of being driven out of their own neighborhood and their resultant distrust of Columbia University. Still, the university argues that the proposed campus is designed to bolster neighborhood quality of life: "Columbia has promised to relocate residents directly displaced by its \$7 billion plan, which it expects will create nearly 7,000 new jobs over 25 to 30 years. . . . It has reserved space on the campus for a public school specializing in math, science and engineering" (Eviatar). Columbia plans to take financial responsibility for the dislocation of residents and, in turn, to focus on the potential for creating economic and educational opportunities in the neighborhood.

The project offers other benefits, as evidenced by Columbia's architectural design philosophy that "an urban campus isn't defined by gates and walls, but by weaving the university into the fabric of city life." (Columbia University Web site). The university

boasts that “new trees, lighting, street furnishings, public art and publicly accessible open space would invite people to the entire area. New buildings would not only be open to the public but would also look and feel open because of transparent glass at the street level” (Columbia University Web site). This is an intelligent, modern approach to the urban placement of an academic institution. The goal of chief architect Renzo Piano, a native of Italy, is to create the feel of a piazza. He states, “the people will come, there will be discourse” (Eviatar). Piano and the university aim to create a space where the Ivy League and West Harlem communities can share their day-to-day activities and thereby engage in a dialogue that will further human understanding. This type of engagement is a fundamental device of intellectual inquiry and, if realized, could benefit both groups at the frontier.

For discourse to occur, however, there needs to be an element of trust between the West Harlem and Columbia communities. In her essay “The Uses of Sidewalks: Contact,” Jane Jacobs examines the elements necessary for constructive public contact. She states,

The sum of such casual public contact at a local level . . . is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource of personal or neighborhood need. The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized. And, above all, it implies no private commitments” (73-74).

The problem with Manhattanville’s attempt to create a public space where West Harlem and Columbia will have “contact at a local level” is that the very existence of the campus creates distrust between the two groups. Chairperson of the local community board Jordi Reyes-Montblanc commented, “On a scale of 1 to 10, Columbia is a minus 5 in terms of trust” (Williams). Due to the university’s fraught history with Harlem, concerns about eminent domain, and the threat of gentrification, the West Harlem community is hard-pressed to feel “public respect and trust” toward Columbia. Distrust—or, worse, resentment—could lead the Harlem community to avoid the new campus, which would obviously make physical and intellectual exchange with the Columbia community unlikely.

It is important to include the perspective of the students who would occupy the future Manhattanville campus, as they would be responsible for half of the intercultural discourse that might occur at this frontier. As a Columbia student, I am aware of my contribution to the gentrification of the Morningside Heights neighborhood and feel some discomfort in being party to a process that has driven out local residents. I do realize that gentrification has helped to make the neighborhood safer for the residents who live here, and I appreciate my opportunities as a Columbia student. Given what I understand of the Manhattanville frontier, however, I am unsure of my ability to engage in a dialogue with the West Harlem community. If the local community is

uncomfortable with my presence in West Harlem due to eminent domain disputes or the larger threat of gentrification that I represent, then I too would be uncomfortable on the campus. If my presence is a source of tension for the local community, I would be nervous to enter the campus. And yet I agree with Columbia's argument that the expansion can be seen as an opportunity to weave "the university into the fabric of city life."

By viewing the dynamics of the Manhattanville-West Harlem relationship as a frontier, one can better understand the perspective of both parties affected by this meeting point. The university's expansion is part of the larger history of unequal growth and development that spans from the American West's "civilization" to contemporary gentrification frontiers. The conflicting needs and concerns of the Columbia and West Harlem communities make for a challenging relationship. But by making an effort to preserve the local community, Columbia University has an opportunity to rethink how American institutions approach growth. The Manhattanville project could become a model for expansion that is sensitive to the economic, social, and cultural complexities present at the urban frontier.

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