

# aka “Manhattanville”: A White Paper on Columbia University’s West Harlem Project

The Community Research Group  
of the  
New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University and  
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University  
1051 Riverside Drive, Unit 29  
New York, New York 10032

Drs. Robert and Mindy Fullilove, Co-Directors

March, 2004

## **Introduction**

Columbia University is in desperate need of space to house new programs, employees and students. The university has proposed the “Manhattanville Project” in which they will build new facilities in West Harlem between 125<sup>th</sup> and 133<sup>rd</sup> Street from Broadway to the Hudson River. Current structures will be replaced by exciting, tall, modern facilities that respect the current street grid and enhance the connection between Harlem and its riverfront. This project holds great promise for the future of the university. The issue of interest here is this: what impact will the project have Columbia’s neighbors in Northern Manhattan? Of central concern to this White Paper is the social disruption that is likely to result.

Social disruption has been a topic of interest to health researchers for many years. Groundbreaking work by Alexander Leighton, A. F. C. Wallace and others established that upheaval from natural or man-made causes has the potential to rupture social bonds, confuse cultural practice and transmission, and undermine health practices. Any of these factors can increase the risk for disease. Some of the most important work on the connection between social disruption and disease has been conducted in New York City by Rodrick and Deborah Wallace. Their seminal studies demonstrated that the city’s policy of “planned shrinkage” led not only to massive dissemination of the AIDS epidemic in the Bronx, but also to increases in addiction, violence, asthma, tuberculosis, infant mortality, and a host of other medical problems.

The Community Research Group has conducted studies on the psychology of place, that is, the relationship between people and their near environments. When people are displaced, as they were by planned shrinkage, they mourn their lost neighborhoods, resent the policies (and the people who formulated the policies), and search to replace that which they once had.

### **The consequences of “people removal”**

One policy that led to displacement was the federal program of urban renewal as promulgated by the Housing Act of 1949. This program gave cities money to clear large tracts of “blighted” land for new uses designed to attract rich people back to the city. Many of the areas targeted for clearance were ghetto areas. In fact, 63% of those displaced were African Americans. Thus, the program earned the sobriquet, “Urban renewal is Negro removal,” though we can also understand it, more generally, as “people removal.” With funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Community Research Group sought to track the consequences of urban renewal.

With the exception of a small number of projects in little-used downtown areas, urban renewal projects caused enormous disruption to area residents. Four findings have relevance for Columbia’s West Harlem project:

1) You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet (the Humpty Dumpty Scenario)  
Urban renewal was billed as “progress.” There was little acknowledgement that the benefits of urban renewal accrued to real estate developers and other big business people, while the harms accrued to the poor people who were displaced. Planners told those complaining about urban renewal, “You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.” Not surprisingly, the mitigation of harms fell far short of the actual costs.

2) All that jazz!  
Widespread clearance – whether it affects a forest or a city neighborhood – destroys an ecosystem. No one was compensated for the contents of the neighborhood: the clubs, street life, social organizations, and markets. In the neighborhoods examined in CRG’s study, jazz clubs were an important asset. Few were able to relocate. People lost not only the space of the clubs, but also the sounds of jazz that wafted through the neighborhoods. In that epoch, jazz nearly died in the US, fortunately saved by Asian and European aficionados. This is but one example of the massive, uncompensated losses that accompanied urban renewal. Loss on such a scale triggers further loss. In many communities, urban renewal initiated an accelerating downward spiral of loss that has not been stopped. Ironically enough, the present-day incarnation of the Cotton Club is located on a plot of land slated for clearance in the first stage of this expansion project.

3) Burn, baby, burn  
One of the unintended consequences of urban renewal was its contribution to triggering the civil disorders that swept American cities between 1964 and 1968. This was linked to several factors: the massive destruction, without replacement, of low income housing; the constriction of more and more people of color into fewer and fewer housing units due to fierce enforcement of residential segregation; and the alienation that people experienced from seeing their neighborhoods destroyed by an uncaring central government. Simply put, alienating territory alienates people. Let us note that it was quite typical for the territory that was seized for urban renewal to be renamed, as, for example, the Lower Hill in Pittsburgh is now called “Crawford/Roberts.”

4) “You paint your house, you fix your house...”

Poor African Americans migrated to cities in order to seek opportunity. They worked very hard, often for pennies a day, in order to make it in America. When they could, they bought homes, they built churches, they organized businesses, and they created a way of life. All of this was lost in urban renewal. The sorrow that follows the loss of such a complex entity as a neighborhood is best described in the words of the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, as “a chief woe, world-sorrow.” People carry such grief in their hearts for the rest of their lives. A new home is a new home: it does not replace the one that went before. One man interviewed by CRG, and quoted above, said, “I got my house to where I liked it and then the government came and took it away.”

**A new lens on the West Harlem project**

Viewing the West Harlem project in light of these findings, CRG finds several problems.

- The materials for the project celebrate progress, but downplay harms. Because the discourse the enormous costs, the mitigation will surely be inadequate.
- The impact of insufficient mitigation will be a deeper impoverishment of already poor people. This has many corollaries, among them a deeper alienation within the city.
- Finally, the project, targets part of a ghetto neighborhood that has lost territory to urban renewal in the past, has seen previous efforts by Columbia to take its land, and is currently threatened by massive gentrification. The fact that the area is an underused industrial area -- in general, the best kind of area for urban renewal -- is a secondary characteristic of the area.

Yet the West Harlem project has the potential to do great good. The communities of Northern Manhattan are suffering. A recent newspaper story pointed out that nearly half of all black men are unemployed, and most of the unemployed are undereducated. The shortage of low-income housing has contributed to massive homelessness. Of the estimated 16,000 homeless children in the city, about half are suffering from asthma that is largely untreated. The list of unsolved problems is long. A great university, acting as a good neighbor and community partner, could make enormous contributions to finding solutions and creating a better day for area residents. This future is highly desirable for all parties.

How do we move away from the Humpty Dumpty scenario? While studying urban renewal, CRG encountered many examples of neighborhood partnerships that were charting very new, very exciting directions. Following such models has the potential to make the Columbia expansion beneficial for all concerned. In order to move in that direction, Columbia, in conversation with a very broad array of neighborhood people, needs to discuss the following questions:

1) What is the list of harms posed by the West Harlem project?

Columbia points out that the West Harlem project will lead to progress and it would be hard to turn away from its possibilities. Urban renewal and other programs of city reorganization are always billed as progress, but the gains are not uniformly distributed. Typically, developers profit and residents suffer. Therefore, to make the conversation

more honest, CRG would suggest Columbia must acknowledge the costs to Upper Manhattan and pose the question of mitigating harms.

### 2) Who gets to stay in Northern Manhattan?

Especially for the people of color in Northern Manhattan, unemployment is severe (50% of black men are not working) and housing is very expensive and about to become more so (Columbia's development will accelerate gentrification unmercifully). The odds are slim that current residents will be future residents of the area, given present trends. Columbia can be part of the upheaval, or part of the stabilization. Columbia, too, is feeling pressed and absent significant new space, might choose to relocate. Can neighbors make a long-term commitment to each other?

### 3) What future does the Northern Manhattan area envision?

When the University takes this portion of Harlem, its current and potential uses will be lost as an asset to the larger neighborhood. This alienation of territory leads to alienation among people. If the University stands for learning as positive endeavor, it behooves its leaders to grow without alienation. This involves creating a real partnership with the neighborhoods of Northern Manhattan such that we all perceive the space as shared, and we all benefit from mutual investment. CRG would suggest that very broad processes be initiated to engage people with envisioning the area's future.

### **Conclusion**

Northern Manhattan will change as a result of the massive spatial reorganization proposed by Columbia University. We will live with the consequences of these changes for tens, if not hundreds, of years. An affirmative process, that acknowledges harms and includes partners in planning, is most likely to result in an exciting and health-giving outcome to the work now in progress.

### **Recommended readings**

Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It*, New York: Ballantine/One World, June 2004.

Stevan Hobfall, *Stress, Culture, and Community: The Psychology and Philosophy of Stress*, New York: Plenum Press, 1998.

Alexander Leighton, *My Name is Legion: Foundations for a Theory of Man in Relation to Culture*, New York: Basic Books, 1959.

Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Mazeway Disintegration: The Individual's Perception of Socio-Cultural Disorganization," *Human Organization*, 16:23-27, 1957.

Deborah and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York Was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled*, London: Verso Books, 1999.