

Ashwin Marathe

Race, Class, and Politics in New York City

Professor Matthew Vaz

8 March 2023

Columbia University: a history of hostile expansion

Columbia's recent acquisition of the Maranamay Hotel—a building that has been abandoned for fifteen years—to serve as a new undergraduate dormitory may seem like an innocent move by a university struggling to find space in New York City. However, when placed in context of Columbia's expansionary history, the move can be seen as yet another attempt to acquire space without concern for local residents. Since Columbia's humble beginnings at Trinity Church in 1754, its expansion has been motivated by a desire to provide more resources for students and faculty, which has resulted in billions of dollars being spent to acquire more land. As it stands, Columbia is one of the city's largest land owners.¹ While this has resulted in more educational and civic spaces, it has also created a tense relationship with the communities it expands into. In this paper, I will place Columbia's current expansion in historical context to show how its hostility towards residents has led to a conflict between the university and its surrounding community.

On October 31, 1754, Governor James DeLancey of New York submitted a charter founding King's College, making it the fifth oldest higher education institution in the United States and the oldest in New York.² Classes were held in July of that year at Trinity Church—also known as the Park Place campus—in lower Manhattan, where the university

¹ Aleksey Bilogur, “*Who are the biggest landowners in New York City?*” May 27, 2016, <https://www.residentmar.io/2016/05/27/biggest-landowners-nyc.html#:~:text=Columbia%20University%20is%20the%20largest,York%20Public%20Library%2C%20for%20comparison.>

² Melani Dieg, “*Is Columbia a Different Neighbor? A Comparative Analysis of University Real Estate Acquisition Practices*” 5.

would remain until the 1840s: Throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s, Columbia depended upon property to fund its existence and accommodate its growing student and faculty populations; by 1850, half of Columbia's budget relied on "income from property rentals."³ The university stayed at its Park Place campus until 1857, when it moved to inhabit the abandoned Deaf and Dumb Asylum on Madison and Park Avenue. This campus, intended to be "temporary," was used for the next forty years and took up 85,000 square feet.⁴ A desire for more land was evident among the student body, as an 1877 *Columbia Daily Spectator* article describes: "Nothing is more striking to the casual visitor at Columbia than the want of room in the present buildings."⁵ At the end of the 19th century, the university acquired significant land: a School of Mines in 1864, a law school in 1882, and Barnard in 1889.⁶

The want for more land was heard by University President Seth Low, who served from 1890 to 1902. Columbia moved in the 1890s to Morningside Heights on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The biggest expansion since the move in 1857, Low noted the urgency of the decision: "Columbia cannot afford to put a stop to her educational development during the next twenty-five years in order to provide a site for the distant future."⁷ The \$2,000,000 purchase included land from West 116th to West 120th streets. By 1915, the Morningside campus had eight new buildings by 1915.⁸

³ Robert McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia A History of Columbia University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 131.

⁴ *History of Columbia University, 1754-1904* (New York: The Columbia University Press, The Macmillan Company, agents; London : Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1904), 130.

⁵ "More Room," *Columbia Daily Spectator*. October 1, 1877.

<https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18771001-01.2.2&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1-byDA-txt-txIN-deaf----->

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Columbia's New Project." *Columbia Daily Spectator*. December 16, 1891.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1891/12/16/103357543.html?pageNumber=5https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1891/12/16/103357543.html?pageNumber=5>

⁸ McCaughey, 230.

Columbia's move to the Upper West Side coincided with a change in New York City's demographics: the Great Migration of African Americans to the North and the immigration of Puerto Ricans into the area. Morningside Heights also grew more diverse, with many African Americans residing north of 122nd Street and Puerto Ricans by 114th Street.⁹ To deal with the changing demographics, local institutions created Morningside Heights Inc. in 1947. The group consisted of 14 local institutions—Barnard College, Riverside Church, Jewish Theological Seminary, and more—though Columbia “held the most sway within the organization.”¹⁰ The purpose of the organization was to “promote the improvement of Morningside Heights as an attractive, residential, educational, and cultural area.”¹¹ The result was a takeover of buildings and a decrease in affordable housing. The Great Depression had created stark conditions for landlords, who found it difficult to find renters who could pay their rent on time. Many tenants turned to single-room occupancies (SROs), which were a common form of affordable housing, where residents shared a common floor bathroom and kitchen. Throughout the 1950s, the organization bought SROs, which they viewed as “centers of prostitution, drinking, gambling, and other illicit activity.”¹² They also created a report focused on “small slum-clearance projects,” to reclaim decaying buildings inhabited by Black and Puerto Rican residents.¹³

⁹ Melani Dieg, “*Is Columbia a Different Neighbor? A Comparative Analysis of University Real Estate Acquisition Practices*” 11.

¹⁰ Katherine Mirett, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal.*” (Journal of Planning History, doi:10.1177/1538513210392882), 10.

¹¹ Melani Dieg, “*Is Columbia a Different Neighbor? A Comparative Analysis of University Real Estate Acquisition Practices.*” 11.

¹² Micheal Carriere, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal.*” (Journal of Planning History 10, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513210392882>), 11.

¹³ “SLUM CLEARANCE ASKED IN BIG AREA AROUND COLUMBIA; Morningside Heights Group Seeks to Protect Cultural and Religious Sites Reclamation of the Morningside Heights Area Is Urged in Report RENEWAL SOUGHT IN COLUMBIA AREA,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1959. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/10/15/80557879.html?pageNumber=1>

Between 1940 and 1966, Columbia acquired 108 new buildings and evicted 7,000 residents, 85 percent of which were African American or Puerto Rican.¹⁴ By 1963, Columbia had “acquired \$30 million worth of property... 73 low-rent apartment buildings... and nearly 20 cheap SRO hotels.”¹⁵ Morningside Heights Inc. effectively became an arm of the administration to rid the neighborhood of activities it deemed corruptive—displacing the residents who most needed affordable housing in the process.

Relations between Columbia and the local community quickly deteriorated. Residents expressed frustration over a lack of communication, noting that “the city should require them to make their plans known,” and accused Columbia of “bigotry.”¹⁶ The worsening relations formed the groundwork for opposition to Columbia’s next project: a gymnasium in Morningside Park.

Harlem was reeling from the loss of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, the same year Columbia began building a new gymnasium in Morningside Park. When Columbia initially announced the plan in 1960, it was supported by community advocates, largely because the university promised equal access to the gym for the community; however, by 1968, the “idea of a predominately white private institution building a structure in a public, predominantly black, community park” angered local residents.¹⁷ Columbia only left 12.5% of the new space open to

¹⁴ “Columbia University’s Expansion and the Struggle for the Future of Harlem,” *Planners Network*, October 14, 2009.

<https://www.plannersnetwork.org/2009/10/columbia-universitys-expansion-and-the-struggle-for-the-future-of-harlem/>.

¹⁵ “Universities: Agony on Morningside Heights,” *Time Magazine*, March 8, 1968.

<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,899987,00.html>.

¹⁶ “Morningside Heights Is Having Growing Pains and Strain Shows on Area’s Residents; NEIGHBORS ASSAIL COLUMBIA GROWTH; Bitterness Rises Over Plans to Buy More Buildings in Morningside Heights; PROTEST RALLY FRIDAY; University Seeking Goodwill Through Costly Effort to Improve Community.” *The New York Times*, January 18, 1964.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/01/18/archives/morningside-heights-is-having-growing-pains-and-strain-shows-on.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁷ Bradley, Stefan. “‘This Is Harlem Heights’: Black Student Power and the 1968 Columbia University Rebellion.” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2008), 52

the community and had separate entrances for community members and Columbia affiliates, leading opponents of the park to label the park “Gym Crow.”¹⁸ Construction began on February 18, 1968, and was met with a demonstration of 150 people organized by the Students for Democratic Society (SDS), Graduate Student Council, and the College Citizenship Council.¹⁹ On March 27, 1968, 200 students barricaded the offices of President Grayson Kirk and Vice President David Trumna. A month later, 1,000 students occupied five Columbia buildings, leading to President Kirk forcibly removing and arresting several hundred students. Columbia halted construction of the gym later that spring.²⁰

The 1968 protests were more than a successful challenge to Columbia’s expansion: they represented a shift in the contentious relationship between Columbia and local residents, as the community successfully “turn[ed] the university’s belief in its privileged position... on its head.”²¹ The story was picked up internationally in Paris, classes were canceled, and a university senate was formed.²² Notably, the “student concern for the community” was a “fairly new phenomenon at Columbia” as student groups “saw in it an obvious example of the power

¹⁸ Bradley, Stefan. “‘This Is Harlem Heights’: Black Student Power and the 1968 Columbia University Rebellion.” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2008), 99.

<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-173646761/this-is-harlem-heights-black-student-power-and>.

¹⁹ Melani Dieg, “Is Columbia a Different Neighbor? A Comparative Analysis of University Real Estate Acquisition Practices” 23.

²⁰ Stefan Bradley, “1968 Protests at Columbia University Called Attention to ‘Gym Crow’ and Got Worldwide Attention.” *The Conversation*, n.d.

<https://theconversation.com/1968-protests-at-columbia-university-called-attention-to-gym-crow-and-got-worldwide-attention-102093>.

²¹ Micheal Carriere, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal*,” 11.

²² McCaughey, 428

structure's exploitation of the lower class."²³ Indeed, the campus witnessed an increase in student activism from groups like University Student Council, Columbia CORE, SDS, and more.

Columbia announced its next expansion outside of its current campus—something it had not done since its 1856 move to Morningside Heights—in 2003, by President Lee C. Bollinger. The plan was a massive expansion into Manhattanville. The \$6.3 billion plan, intended to take 25 years, included 17 new acres of research facilities, outdoor recreational spaces, and new businesses for the local community. Similar to the 1950s, when Columbia sought a revitalization of Morningside Heights due to what they viewed as deteriorating conditions, the university worked with the New York City Economic Development Corporation on a study of Manhattanville, arriving at the conclusion that the neighborhood was “blighted.”²⁴ Columbia included a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) that included \$76 million for a flexible benefit fund,²⁵ \$20 million for an Affordable Housing Fund, \$4 million for legal assistance, and \$30 million for a community public school.²⁶ Despite this, groups in Harlem like the Morningside Heights Community Coalition, Community Board 9, West Harlem Environmental Action, and more, voiced their opposition to construction, predicting unaffordable rent hikes.²⁷

Columbia's move into Manhattanville has created more distrust between the university and the community. The university obtained the Manhattanville property through eminent domain: a process that allows the government to seize private property if it is used for a public

²³ “SDS Plans Protest Today: SAS Takes Neutral Stand,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 30, 1969.

<https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19690430-01.2.2&srpos=7&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-sds+plans+protest+today----->

²⁴ Sheila Foster, “Columbia University Expansion into West Harlem,” *UNHabitat*,

<https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/NYC%20Case%20Study.pdf>

²⁵ Timothy Williams and Ray Rivera. “Columbia Expansion Gets Green Light.” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/nyregion/20columbia.html>.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Sheila Foster, “Columbia University Expansion into West Harlem,” 425.

purpose. One family sued Columbia on the basis that its project “only served the private interests of Columbia and not the interest of the general public.”²⁸ In 2009, the New York Court of Appeals rejected the lawsuit on the grounds that Columbia’s project would improve public infrastructure and “generate substantial revenue for the state and city”²⁹ Since then, Columbia has built a new business school and campus, and opened a coffee shop and rock-climbing gym accessible to the public. Despite these public amenities and CBA, residents have voiced that rents have “begun to skyrocket in the area and many local businesses have vacated.”³⁰ Residents have also noted a shift in community culture: as one resident, in an interview for the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, said, “This community has lost a piece of its soul due to Columbia’s expansion.”³¹ The “soul” that residents see as being lost is very real; one resident, Gurnam Singh, refused to have his gas station of 25 years demolished, as he viewed his business as “part of my family. Money is not everything. You don’t sell your children.”³²

The fight between Columbia and local residents is far from over. The university has continued to buy real estate to expand housing options for students. In 2020, it bought Monarch Heights, costing renters \$3,600 per month. In 2021, the Vandewater opened, with the price of a one-bedroom apartment starting at \$1 million.³³ These purchases represent a trend to offer luxury

²⁸ Katherine Mirett, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal*,” 431.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 427.

³⁰ Sheila Foster, “Columbia University Expansion into West Harlem,”

³¹ Amine Bit, “‘This Community Has Lost a Piece of Its Soul’: Community Members Weigh the Impacts of Columbia’s Expansion - Columbia Spectator.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 16, 2022.

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2022/02/16/this-community-has-lost-a-piece-of-it-s-soul-community-members-weigh-the-impacts-of-columbias-expansion/>.

³² Timothy Williams, “2 Gas Stations, and a Family’s Resolve, Confront Columbia Expansion Plan.” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2008.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/nyregion/21gas.html>.

³³ Amine Bit, “‘This Community Has Lost a Piece of Its Soul’: Community Members Weigh the Impacts of Columbia’s Expansion - Columbia Spectator,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 16, 2022.

housing as options for off-campus stay. The university is also expanding on-campus housing. In February 2023, the university announced its conversion of the Maranamay Hotel on West 112th and Broadway into an undergraduate dormitory. Soon after, the Morningside Heights Housing Commission (MHCC) released a report urging the university to include housing for “non-affiliates of low and moderate income.”³⁴ On February 28th, MHCC held a virtual town-hall meeting for local residents to meet with representatives of Columbia to discuss the new dorm, where residents expressed their concerns about the need for affordable housing and the lack of communication on the part of university administration. In response, Columbia promised to continue “transparency and outreach” with “relevant updates on a regular basis.”³⁵

Since 1754, Columbia has increased its land usage to continue its mission of providing a world-class educational experience for students and faculty. Yet, from the expansion of the 1950s, to the gym riots of 1968, to the new Manhattanville campus, the university has continuously relied on taking over land in low-income communities. Analyzing this history demonstrates the very tangible negative impacts of expansion. Like Singh’s account of losing his family-owned gas station, each resident that is displaced due to Columbia’s expansion has their own personal story that must be heard. As Columbia continues to expand to accommodate its growing student and faculty populations, it should consider its history and make an effort to engage with the local community in a more positive manner.

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2022/02/16/this-community-has-lost-a-piece-of-it-s-soul-community-members-weigh-the-impacts-of-columbias-expansion/>

³⁴ “A Report and Proposal to the Columbia University Community at Large,” *Morningside Heights Community Coalition*

³⁵ Amira McKee, “Columbia to Convert Former Hotel The Maranamay into New Undergraduate Dorm - Columbia Spectator,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 15, 2023.

<https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2023/02/15/columbia-to-convert-former-hotel-the-maranamay-into-new-undergraduate-dorm/>.

Bibliography

A History of Columbia University, 1754-1904. New York: The Columbia university press, The Macmillan company, agents, 1904.

Aleksey Bilogur, “*Who are the biggest landowners in New York City?*” May 27, 2016,

<https://www.residentmar.io/2016/05/27/biggest-landowners-nyc.html#:~:text=Columbia%20University%20is%20the%20largest,York%20Public%20Library%2C%20for%20comparison.>

Amine Bit, “‘This Community Has Lost a Piece of Its Soul’: Community Members Weigh the Impacts of Columbia’s Expansion - Columbia Spectator.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 16, 2022.

[https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2022/02/16/this-community-has-lost-a-piece-of-its-soul-community-members-weigh-the-impacts-of-columbias-expansion/.](https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2022/02/16/this-community-has-lost-a-piece-of-its-soul-community-members-weigh-the-impacts-of-columbias-expansion/)

Amira McKee, “Columbia to Convert Former Hotel The Maranamay into New Undergraduate Dorm - Columbia Spectator,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 15, 2023.

[https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2023/02/15/columbia-to-convert-former-hotel-the-maranamay-into-new-undergraduate-dorm/.](https://www.columbiaspectator.com/city-news/2023/02/15/columbia-to-convert-former-hotel-the-maranamay-into-new-undergraduate-dorm/)

“A Report and Proposal to the Columbia University Community at Large,” *Morningside Heights Community Coalition*

Bradley, Stefan. “‘This Is Harlem Heights’: Black Student Power and the 1968 Columbia University Rebellion.” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2008).

<https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-173646761/this-is-harlem-heights-black-student-power-and>.

“Columbia’s New Project.” *Columbia Daily Spectator*. December 16, 1891.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1891/12/16/103357543.html?pageNumber=5><https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1891/12/16/103357543.html?pageNumber=5>

“Columbia University’s Expansion and the Struggle for the Future of Harlem,” *Planners Network*, October 14, 2009.

<https://www.plannersnetwork.org/2009/10/columbia-universitys-expansion-and-the-struggle-for-the-future-of-harlem/>.

History of Columbia University, 1754-1904 (New York: The Columbia University Press, The Macmillan Company, agents; London : Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1904), 130.

Katherine Mirett, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal.*” (*Journal of Planning History*, doi:10.1177/1538513210392882).

Melani Dieg, “*Is Columbia a Different Neighbor? A Comparative Analysis of University Real Estate Acquisition Practices*”

Micheal Carriere, “*Fighting the War against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal.*” (*Journal of Planning History* 10, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538513210392882>).

“*More Room,*” *Columbia Daily Spectator*. October 1, 1877.

<https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs18771001-01.2.2&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1-byDA-txt-txIN-deaf----->

“Morningside Heights Is Having Growing Pains and Strain Shows on Area’s Residents; NEIGHBORS ASSAIL COLUMBIA GROWTH; Bitterness Rises Over Plans to Buy More Buildings in Morningside Heights; PROTEST RALLY FRIDAY; University Seeking Goodwill Through Costly Effort to Improve Community.” *The New York Times*, January 18, 1964.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/01/18/archives/morningside-heights-is-having-growing-pains-and-strain-shows-on.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Robert McCaughey, “*Stand, Columbia A History of Columbia University*.” New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

“SDS Plans Protest Today: SAS Takes Neutral Stand,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, April 30, 1969.

<https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19690430-01.2.2&srpos=7&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-sds+plans+protest+today----->

Sheila Foster, “Columbia University Expansion into West Harlem,” *UNHabitat*,

<https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/NYC%20Case%20Study.pdf>

“SLUM CLEARANCE ASKED IN BIG AREA AROUND COLUMBIA; Morningside Heights Group Seeks to Protect Cultural and Religious Sites Reclamation of the Morningside Heights Area Is Urged in Report RENEWAL SOUGHT IN COLUMBIA AREA,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1959.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1959/10/15/80557879.html?pageNumber=1>

Stefan Bradley, “1968 Protests at Columbia University Called Attention to ‘Gym Crow’ and Got

Worldwide Attention.” *The Conversation*, n.d.

<https://theconversation.com/1968-protests-at-columbia-university-called-attention-to-gym-crow-and-got-worldwide-attention-102093>.

Timothy Williams and Ray Rivera. “Columbia Expansion Gets Green Light.” *The New York Times*, December 20, 2007.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/nyregion/20columbia.html>.

Timothy Williams, “2 Gas Stations, and a Family’s Resolve, Confront Columbia Expansion Plan.” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2008.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/nyregion/21gas.html>.

“Universities: Agony on Morningside Heights,” *Time Magazine*, March 8, 1968.

<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,899987,00.html>.