On Campus

Architecture as an Instrument of Leadership

By
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As Columbia begins to look north to Manhattanville and to its future for the long term, it is thinking again about architecture and thinking about it in a different way. Now for Columbia architecture is not just a component of planning but also an instrument of leadership—the powerful art that for millennia has helped take us where we need to go and make the public case for going there.

Columbia has thought this way about architecture before, most importantly when in the 1890s it staked out the Morningside campus with the help of Charles Follen McKim. McKim and his partners were then at the top of their game and masters of the issues of their times. They had been leaders in a big turn in American architecture, when at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1892 they boldly presented a new way of understanding the American potential and made the case in architecture for a United States role as a world power. They knew intimately the original prototype for American higher education—Jefferson's University of Virginia—and they also knew what needed to change in that prototype to fit an urbanizing, increasingly cosmopolitan country. McKim brought these understandings to bear for Columbia when he proposed its ingenious Morningside Acropolis, the model of order and novelty that captured the strength of that moment in architecture to help Columbia begin to take a lead as a university in the world.

McKim's master plan held up well, at least until times changed and it was asked to do things it had no room for—to meet larger needs than its modules had ever been expected to hold. After a wave of uninspired additions in the 1950s and '60s, Columbia in the early '70s made a stab at adapting the old vision to new times with a master plan by I.M. Pei that looked for ways to expand the campus up and down, if

not out. But the exercise couldn’t have come at a worse time, with the Columbia campus already a battleground in a new world revolution. The certainties of the twentieth century were rapidly unraveling and progressive public architecture was hunkering down. The master plan was never adopted; as Columbia continued to build over the next quarter-century, it fit things in where it could.

Then came September 11 and the beginning of the next global change. Architecture was in the middle of the catastrophe, not just as a victim but as the bearer of its ultimate meaning—its colossal wake-up call to the consequences of global inequality—and then as a tool in its resolution. At the start of the struggle to rebuild—to find not just vengeance but ways to meet global social needs—New York found itself to a remarkable degree looking to architecture for leadership. What we lacked—what has over-strained architecture so far at Ground Zero—was a clear sense of where architecture ought to be taking us.

It is against this background that Columbia is thinking about building for its needs, and those of New York. The University has long drawn on and fed into its surrounding neighborhoods and the vitality of the City. In preserving close ties with the communities of upper Manhattan, Columbia is ensuring that they too will reap benefits—economic, environmental, and otherwise—from the new campus. As a great public source of human understanding, the University involves and serves us all. In this light, Manhattanville—a generous south-facing urban slope defined by handsome old public works—is not just a development site, but a rare set of possibilities for New York. The new campus could link more than Columbia’s campuses and communities, making a new connection for all of us with our future. The campus could be what we haven’t seen for years in New York, a great seminal architectural idea.

Columbia has done just what it should to start making the most of this opportunity. Like Seth Low before him, Lee C. Bollinger has chosen a remarkable architect in Renzo Piano and given him an eminent collaborator in Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Renzo Piano is not just one of the very best in the world but the one best suited to a humanist venture. Piano and the Renzo Piano Building Workshop reflect all the technical achievements of the twentieth century put to human service in an architecture of rare intelligence and grace. In the Workshop, the great paradigm—the architect as *homo faber*, the maker of beautiful tools—is now at work for us.

What will go into Manhattanville or what will come out of it is as yet far from clear. What is possible, though—what Columbia, Piano, and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill could give us—is something we acutely need post-9/11, a vision with specific and valuable content. As the campus takes shape, Columbia will show off to the world in an architecture of humanism a new model workplace of the mind. As it did 100 years ago, Columbia's architecture will build New York a new device to foster and celebrate the creative interactions that have made the City great. In what ideally will be the strangeness of its novelty, Columbia's next campus will once again wake us to the wonders of the achievements of the mind and show us their worth. For this crucial constituent of the human future, Columbia and its architecture will once again take the lead.

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