Dear Chair Burden and Commissioners:

My name is Vishaan Chakrabarti. I am a professor at Columbia University, a Partner of SHoP Architects, and the former Director of the Manhattan Office at the Department of City Planning. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify this afternoon. It is always an honor and a pleasure to appear before you.

At the outset, I would like to disclose that I was brought in several years ago as a consultant for the NYU team as they were looking at a range of options to address their substantial space needs.

I am testifying today about the merits of the thoughtful, deliberative and collaborative approach that has been taken by NYU.

As with Columbia and every other major academic institution in the country, NYU has significant growth needs. The City’s recent actions to bring Cornell-Technion to Roosevelt Island are testimony to the importance of academic growth for New York City and the diversification of our economy.

Similar to Cornell’s plan on Roosevelt Island and Columbia’s ongoing expansion in Manhattanville, NYU has taken a studied, comprehensive, and balanced approach to where and how it should expand, with only a portion of its space needs planned for its main campus in proximity to the Village.
In response to both design and neighborhood character concerns, NYU has judiciously concentrated this program on the “superblocks” – land that is owned by NYU and is dominated by more modern structures and landscapes than those that are typically found in Greenwich Village, NoHo and SoHo.

Today those superblocks are not integrated with these great New York neighborhoods. In the future, the plan seeks to re-integrate those blocks by building new streetwalls, fantastic new open space, and important community facilities including a new school.

Today, the open spaces in and along the superblocks are disjointed. In the future, the plan will bring these elements together into a robust and much-needed network of public open space that will serve both the University and the neighborhood. Greene Street will extend from SoHo into a new greenway to the north, beginning a multi-block open space path leading through the superblocks and up to Washington Square Park.

Today, the edges of the superblocks are nebulous, tattered and ill-defined. In the future, streetwalls will be created in the superblocks along La Guardia and Mercer Streets in response to the strong streetwalls that exist across the street to the east and west. Because of their pivotal location, the superblocks are the transition in scale from the lower scale of the Village to the east, and the larger, more industrial scales of NoHo to the west and SoHo to the south. Additional density, especially along those western and southern edges, is critically important to making this marriage of three neighborhoods into seamless connective tissue. Of particular importance is the all-important corner of Houston and Mercer Streets, which is occupied today by a lackluster gym, and needs much more density and active mixed-uses to create the knuckle that binds these three cherished but currently disconnected neighborhoods.
Today, the northern superblock features centralized open space that is elevated and shielded from the sidewalks, with little sense of public access or amenity. In the future, the design of new open space and curvilinear new buildings will invite passersby into the block, creating a lush public oasis in an area otherwise starved for public green space. Paradoxically, it is the addition of buildings along LaGuardia and Mercer on the edges of this open space that help to define it, give it character, and make it this oasis – a contemplative counterpart to the hustle and bustle of Washington Square Park to the north.

To be sure, this plan represents change and change is often hard. But today these superblocks and the three critically important neighborhoods that surround them have been severed: the vestige of post-war urban planning that has left fragmentation and placelessness in its wake. With this plan, the Commission has the opportunity to not only provide NYU with the critical space it needs to grow, but to do so in a manner that knits the Village, NoHo and SoHo together with open space and buildings designed by world-class talent, a suture to the wounds inflicted by our predecessors. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in our City’s history, and we must seize it.

I urge the Commission to approve this well-thought out, comprehensive plan. Thank you for this opportunity.