EMBRACING A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE SUPERBLOCK STEWARDSHIP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

SUBMITTED IN DECEMBER 2015
MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR
LAURENCE MASLON

Since the establishment of the University Space Priorities Working Group over three years ago, the notion of stewardship—the mutually supportive relationship between New York University and the residents of the Superblocks—has been a pertinent and ongoing concern. Those concerns have been articulated by the Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee through a consistent series of meetings and discussions, in parallel with similar discussions and advice around the new building at 181 Mercer Street. What follows are a set of carefully considered and crafted recommendations presented to the University.

We broke down our concerns into four areas: representation and input; the management of Open Space; programming (a new initiative); and enforcement. Perhaps it is best to think of these categories as a Venn diagram; each category overlaps and supports another—they all work together to form an integrated way of crafting a new, breathing vision of stewardship.

Given the tremendous effort going into new construction on the southern block, as well as the previous history between the University and its residents, these recommendations could not, in my opinion, be more pertinent in our journey forward together. It is my hope that, given the transitions and challenges ahead of us, the University will see these recommendations as a rare, but welcome, opportunity to create a new and improved policy of stewardship. While we recognize that many (but not most) of our recommendations require some ex post facto social engineering and not inconsiderable expense, the Stewardship Committee is optimistic that the University will embrace this proposal to enhance the quality of life for the residents of the Superblocks and, by extension, the neighborhood. The following document represents an unexplored, but not unconsidered, pathway forward.

In this spirit, the SSAC looks forward to discussing the following proposals with the University as the new year begins, and we respectfully submit them for your consideration.
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I. BACKGROUND

Among the recommendations of the University Space Priorities Working Group (“USPWG”), which issued its final report in March 2014, was the creation of a subsequent stewardship committee charged with providing “ongoing assessment and advice for the maintenance and improvement of quality-of-life issues concerning University properties on the superblocks (bound by West 3rd Street on the north, Mercer Street on the east, LaGuardia Place on the west, and West Houston Street on the south) before, during and after any construction.” The University established the Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee (“SSAC”) in May 2014.

The Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee comprises:

- Seven faculty selected by the Faculty Councils
- Two faculty selected by the University
- Two students appointed by the Student Senators Council
- One representative from each of the existing tenants associations (Washington Square Village and Silver Towers)
- Three members of the Coles Project Team
- Two members of University Leadership

The Committee has been chaired since its inception by Laurence Maslon, Arts Professor from the Tisch School of the Arts and resident of Washington Square Village. Professor Maslon has also served as Chair of the Stewardship and Quality of Life Committee of the University Space Priorities Working Group.

Specifically, the Committee provides advice to the University on:

- Improvements to the superblocks, including the obligations the University must fulfill under its agreement with the City leading up to the start of construction, the relocation of services currently provided by the Coles Sports Center, and other planned improvements;
- The design process of the 181 Mercer Street building, including input on the architect selection and feedback on the design of the building;
- Mitigation of the effects of construction, including selection of an independent consultant.
- Overall quality-of-life on the superblocks.
- Ongoing stewardship and communication between the University and the community.

A full description of the Committee’s charge, membership, and activities, including summaries of each meeting, are available on its website.

http://www.nyu.edu/about/university-initiatives/space-planning-and-stewardship/space-stewardship.html
The Committee produced its first semi-annual report in spring 2015 highlighting its work which included: participation in the selection of the architectural partnership; the selection and engagement of an independent consultant; input to the University on providing for the needs of fitness and athletics users during the period when Coles is offline; and an evaluation of the open spaces around the superblocks to propose an organic and consistent set of protocols for residents and the community, in order to enhance their quality of life. The SSAC returned to this last item after the release of the semi-annual report.

Our conclusions follow.
II. RENEWED FOCUS ON QUALITY OF LIFE

The Committee divided into four subcommittees, which were charged to generate policy recommendations to enhance life on the superblocks: a subcommittee on residential representation and input; a subcommittee on the creation and use of open spaces; a subcommittee on programming for the superblocks; and a subcommittee on enforcement guidelines for use of space.

The subcommittees were advised to address “principles and parameters” in each of the categories with a view toward focusing their recommendations. The following recommendations were subsequently devised in subcommittee discussion sessions held on October 13 and October 27, 2015, presented in plenary on November 24, 2015, and accepted by acclamation on December 8, 2015.

RESIDENTIAL REPRESENTATION AND INPUT

• For many years, there has been a group of residents formed as the Washington Square Village Tenants Association, largely composed of, and responding to the needs of, non-affiliates. To better meet the needs and provide representation for a large group of affiliate residents that are not currently well represented, it is recommended that there be established a “Washington Square Village Affiliate Association.” In terms of membership, structure, and frequency of meetings, such a group could be patterned after the existing “Silver Towers Tenant Association.” This would constitute a new group to function separately from the WSV Tenants’ Association and be open to any and all residents of WSV who were employees of NYU, and their spouses. The Association would meet at least once a semester, set agendas, elect officers, and act as conduit of two-way communication between the employee residents of WSV and Faculty Housing and the University.

• With three such associations representing different and unique constituencies of the superblocks – i.e. ST Tenant Association, the WSV Tenant Association and the newly formed WSV Affiliate Association – these groups would better capture the full range of issues and concerns among the residents of these blocks.
  o The Committee recommends that the Office of Faculty Housing (OFH) provide whatever logistical support may be needed to set up the Affiliate Association.
  o The Committee recommends using the popular “NYU Faculty with Kids” Facebook page as a place to announce and solicit the new WSV Affiliate Association.

• Depending on which issues provide a common point of intersection, these groups could also decide to meet together from time to time. For example, issues involving the use of common open space or policies regulating residential life might benefit from a joint meeting. Or, if there were changes proposed in rent levels for affiliates, the ST Tenants Association and the WSV Affiliate Association may want to hold a joint meeting to provide feedback to the University.
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• At any time, representatives from the OFH may be invited by any of these groups to attend their meetings. Conversely, the OFH may ask to be invited to present new information or solicit feedback. There should be an expectation that each group meet at least once a year with OFH representatives.

• The University and the OFH should put a premium on clear, consistent, and regular communication to all the residents through a combination of printed lobby notices, e-mails, websites, LED lobby screens, etc.

CREATION AND USE OF OPEN SPACES

• The open space subcommittee was guided by two general premises: (1) that all constituencies – i.e. families with children of different age ranges, senior citizens, pet owners, seekers of peace and quiet, seekers of more active play space, etc. – should have some open space area that meets their needs, and (2) that by allowing a use in some areas, it would be acceptable to prohibit it in other areas. With this complementary approach, it was thought that the needs of most of the user groups living in and around the superblocks could be accommodated.

Silver Towers

• The new dog run (which is privately operated by the Mercer Houston Dog Run Association) should be the de-facto area on the superblocks for dog use. The University should facilitate its use by underwriting use by dog-owning residents on the superblocks. The cost of annual membership is currently $60.

• The current regulations that prohibit ball playing around the Picasso statue plaza are adequate and generally enforced. It is recommended that tasteful and minimally intrusive signage strategically placed here would help with compliance.

• The Oak Grove is a popular play area for children and picnic spot – it is recommended that dogs be prohibited. Signage should specifically reference that the Oak Grove is a children’s play area – i.e. “children’s play area, no dogs allowed” – or something similar. Barriers (low fence and/or shrubbery) may also be necessary.

• Given the insufficiency of current signage in preventing dog-walkers from using the Oak Grove, the diagonal walkway should be bordered by a low fence or shrub as a further protection for the area. The use of low fences or shrub boundaries should also be explored for other areas where fence removal is proposed.

• The ST Tenants Association should be consulted regarding the use of the lawn area along Houston Street on the south side of Silver Towers 1 (site of a former vegetable garden).

• The lawn area along the east façade of Silver Towers 2 that will border the new Greene Street walk should be considered for a flower garden.
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Existing Superblocks Site Plan

[Image of the existing superblocks site plan with various labels such as "DOG RUN", "PLAZA", "DRIVE", "OAK GROVE", "LANDSCAPE", "BLDG USE", "NYC PARKLAND", "WALK", "LAWN", "Sakai Garden", "Key Park", and "Proposed Building".]
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Please note: Silver Towers and the surrounding landscape are designated New York City Landmarks and so some modifications will require review and approval by the Landmarks Commission.

Washington Square Village

• The Sasaki Garden is a quiet, contemplative space and should remain largely as it is today; however the accessibility and clarity of the entry points need improvement. The entry steps are steep and difficult to navigate; the ramp may not be ADA compliant. The garden should continue to be locked at night. Signage should also be re-evaluated in this area; it is concurrently inconsistent and/or difficult to read.

• The fenced lawn area in back of the LaGuardia retail is both unsightly and underutilized open space. It could be repurposed for many uses, from gardens to activities to seating areas. The southern lawn area may be considered a programmable location - i.e. where resident’s children’s parties can be held [see section on programming]. The service (rear) façade of the LaGuardia retail strip should be improved, i.e. by screening dumpsters. The chain link fence surrounding the lawn area should be replaced (to keep dogs out). With the lawns activated, the area in back of the LaGuardia retail might accommodate patio seating. The new patio on the LaGuardia Place side of the retail building in front of the 3-D printing lab was cited as a model for possible seating in this area.

• In an effort to provide as much green area as possible on the superblocks, the possibility of a green roof atop the LaGuardia retail should be explored. According to the Office of Facilities Management, the retail building has non-traditional framing with open wood joists and thus may not be stable enough to carry the load of garden. There are many types of roof gardens and further study is recommended to see what is feasible.

• Mercer Playground (“LMNOP”), under the auspices of the NYC Parks Department, is currently difficult to access, not well used, and generally not enticing for children. The Committee recommends that the University explore with the Parks Department and help fund a series of design changes.

Design suggestions include:
  o opening up the wrought iron fence along Mercer Street so the playground is accessible from the midblock, in addition to the gates at the north and south ends which are largely hidden;
  o creating access to the Key Park playground area from the Mercer playground through the brick wall, for greater fluidity between the two playgrounds (although entry should not be into the playground directly); and
  o general sprucing up of the playground’s plants and paving.

The configuration of the playground – essentially a long unobstructed space – should be kept as is; it works well for bike riding, scooters, and ball play, activities that appeal to older children age and complement the adjacent key playground.
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Overall

• An overarching recommendation is to open up the WSV block and remove fences wherever feasible. Specifically, the gates prohibiting access to WSV from LaGuardia Place should be removed, and the area improved with lighting and planting. Gate removal would fit well with the planned upgrade to the LaGuardia Place landscape and the recently completed improvements to LaGuardia retail.

• Provide attractive, pedestrian friendly walkways generally throughout WSV, especially the north/south driveways currently characterized by narrow sidewalks and poor pavement conditions. When the new building at 181 Mercer Street comes on line, WSV walkways may be more heavily used. Walkway improvements should be planned throughout the years leading up to and through construction.

• It is recommended that the paved areas on either side of the Key Park, which are currently used to house emergency generators and stage construction projects, be repaved and uses other than storage and staging explored for these areas. It was noted that this area may be noise sensitive with residents’ windows abutting the spaces.

• In regard to the above suggestions, it is further proposed that the University reach out to professional landscapers, urban designers, and so forth, in order to get a professional opinion [and precedents] for this kind of significant re-planning of community space.

A NEW ASPECT: PROGRAMMING FOR THE SUPERBLOCKS

• The principles behind adding a programming component to the superblocks would be to:
  o build community among residents;
  o open up the spaces for the use of residents, students, and neighbors;
  o provide compelling activities for all constituents;
  o provide a conduit for NYU talents and services to the wider community;
  o create a sense of unity and complementary services between Silver Towers and WSV; and;
  o empower the University to administer services and activities open to the outside community as a way for NYU to give back to the neighborhood.

• While the University already provides office space and some programming assistance to a number of constituents -- UPNS, Visiting Neighbors, the Creative Steps daycare center, etc. -- those programs have sprung up in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner. It is recommended that an overarching Office of Programming be created to unify the existing programming efforts, expand and plan programming events and coordinate the use of community spaces.
  o A Program Director position should be created to administer the programming initiative.
  o Programming input should come from a volunteer programming committee of residents from ST and WSV.
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• “NYU Family Care” should be reestablished as part of programming initiative and provide information for families about schools, vaccinations, etc.

• Currently the Office of Faculty Housing (OFH) does not have an office on site at the superblocks. It is recommended that at least one Faculty Housing office be located on-site to assist with the programming initiative as well as other on-going issues that arise for tenants.

• The roll-out of a programming initiative needs to be bold and simple, with clear branding and PR support. There needs to be a cohesive umbrella for programming with clear communication. Ideas for communication include a kiosk, LED boards, and newsletters. Effective communications are essential to keeping residents informed and making them feel part of the community.

• It is recommended that programs be coordinated and or co-hosted with various parts of the University -- i.e. a jazz program or concert with Steinhardt, film program or presentation with Film Studies, etc.

• Programming would be conceived to make sure all constituents (as well as the larger, enveloping community) have some programs/services/activities that would appeal to them. These may include:
  o Book fairs
  o Jazz concert in WSV courtyard
  o Ice cream social
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- Classes / clinics in terrace gardening, interior design, etc.
- Children's soccer clinics
- Bike riding (Mercer Playground, see Open Spaces section)
- Halloween events
- Dog parade
- Summer book reading club
- Summer swing dance event
- Movie screening event

- Programming activities should work in an integrated way with the recommendations put forth by the open spaces subcommittee

- An outdoor space should be designated for community use by application for parties, events, etc. Interested parties would apply for use of said space and requests would be reviewed by the programming committee.

- In the absence of a large indoor space on the superblocks, the majority of programming would be held outside, at least during the fair weather months: April through October.
  - It is recommended that the University provide indoor space for activities with groups of 15 - 30 people and possibly for larger gatherings at a later date.

ENFORCEMENT GUIDELINES FOR USE OF SPACE

- The University should establish a clear set of open space usage polices or “dos and don'ts” that can be distributed by NYU Faculty Housing.
  - The guidelines should be clear and easy to digest -- i.e. a one page bulleted list.
  - The guidelines should touch on issues such as the appropriate use of open spaces -- active and passive spaces -- dog policies, etc.
  - For open space usage policies to be effective, appropriate space should be made available for all reasonable uses.
  - The guidelines should not be NYU Faculty Housing tenant specific, but for all people who enter and use the open spaces on the superblocks
    - To allow better understanding of enforcement needs, the University should assess before any plan implementation if violators tend to be NYU affiliates or from the non-NYU community. So far we have been relying on anecdotal and impressionistic evidence in our discussions, and even a series of informed inputs from the NYU Public Safety Office would be helpful here.
  - Guideline Distribution:
    - With lease renewals alongside the Rights and Responsibilities of Residents in NYU Faculty Housing handbook.
    - The University should ensure polices are being distributed to sub-tenants when they move in – and we hope that soft/pdf versions will be made available wherever possible.
    - Posted on the Faculty Housing website.
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- Posted near Faculty Housing mailboxes and bulletin boards.
- Presented via signage at major entrances and thoroughfares throughout the superblocks.
  - The University should consider Joel Napach’s signage plan.
  - Effective signage placement can include:
    - Around the Oak Grove
    - At the Sasaki Garden entrances
    - Near the Bust of Sylvette
    - Near the Key Park

- The University should plan a systematic roll out of the new policies so all tenants are informed.
  - The plan should be presented at Tenant Association meeting prior to roll out.
  - Roll out should include the full time presence of safety officers for a reasonable period (e.g. 2 weeks) to explain the changes to non-NYU community members who are using the space.

- The University should review and update the existing “Rights and Responsibilities of Residents in NYU Faculty Housing” policy book.

- Faculty Housing should partner with the Tenants Associations to develop these policies and encourage dissemination and respect of the rules.
  - The policies should be discussed at Tenants Association meetings once per year to update policies as needed. Relevant stakeholders (Faculty Housing, Public Safety, Cushman and Wakefield, NYU Landscaping) should attend this meeting.
  - The doormen should be aware of the policies, but should not be tasked as enforcers.

- Once promulgated and distributed, the University should establish a monitoring group composed of one representative from Faculty Housing, Public Safety, Cushman and Wakefield, NYU Landscaping, and others, tasked with walking through the superblocks on a biweekly schedule to identify and address issues. This group should be tasked with thinking through creative strategies to enforce the policies. This group should welcome and encourage Tenant Association involvement.
  - The University should investigate if Public Safety officials can be empowered to write citations and should analyze the pros and cons of such an approach.
  - The Committee sees the issue of violator affiliation - i.e. NYU residents or non-residents of the superblocks -- as complicated. The University should consider to what extent NYU residents and non-residents of the superblocks should be treated differently with regards to penalties for violations.
  - The Committee recommends an increased public safety foot presence on blocks and/or having designated public safety officers for ST/WSV.
  - The Committee does not recommend “shaming” as an enforcement strategy.
  - The Committee thought possible enforcement strategies could include:
    - Citations
    - Letters
    - Fines
• General Items to Consider
  o Should draft recommendations be presented to the Tenants Associations and perhaps to the buildings at large (e.g. via a town hall)? In all cases email and print communication should seek to convey as much of the information as possible – providing a summary of highlights as well as the relevant detail.
  o Should 505 LaGuardia Place be incorporated in the drafting of these policies since they share the plaza area?
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APPENDIX
ROSTER OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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<th>CHAIR</th>
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