“More than half of the nation’s colleges and universities are located in cities. They represent significant contributors to the character of their cities and to the definition of the urban environment. By virtue of their mission, intellectual capital, and investment in physical facilities, urban universities and their medical centers are uniquely positioned to play a leading role in their communities in powerful ways.”

—Judith Rodin

(From The University & Urban Renewal: Out of the Ivory Tower and Into the Streets)
2. A New York Story
Like its city, New York University has often reinvented itself. And like the immigrants who have arrived here with enormous hope and optimism, NYU has made its unlikely journey on grit, guts, and ingenuity.

Its fortunes have risen and fallen along with its city. From the University’s 1831 founding as the first town houses were being built on Washington Square, to the creation of its University Heights campus in the Bronx in the late 1800s as the Village became more industrialized; from its expansion during the 1950s urban renewal, to its near closure during the 1970s, and its unwavering embrace of and recommitment to the city after September 11, NYU’s story has been New York City’s story.
A City and Its University Evolve

In 1831, when Frances Trollope—the English novelist’s mother—visited New York City, she was impressed. The city, she wrote, “rises, like Venice, from the sea, and like that fairest of cities in the days of her glory, receives into its lap tribute of all the riches of the earth.”

That same year, New York University was founded.

It was a period of enormous changes for the city. The Erie Canal had been completed in 1825 and had galvanized city business; the Times of London predicted that its opening would make New York “the London of the New World.” Banking, commerce, and manufacturing soared; public markets expanded. Even the city's streets were newly lit, prompting shops to stay open late and drawing comparisons to London and Paris.

At the time, however, New York City had only one university. And like other higher education institutions in the era, that university served the elite. Church-run, teaching classes in Latin and Greek, it was far removed from the city that would serve the city’s emerging middle class, one that could meet the changing demands of New York City life. It would be, as Gallatin saw it, a university “in and of the city.”

A Part of the Village from the Beginning

Situated amid farmland, Greenwich Village had been a booming section of New York City since the end of the 18th century, when a prison opened on the waterfront and transformed the small rural hamlet. By 1805, demand for houses in the area was high, and John Jacob Astor was investing widely—and wisely—in property.

Formerly a swampland, Washington Square had been drained in the 1790s and turned into a burial ground and occasional execution spot. In 1826, the city bought additional land and laid out a parade ground, which opened on July 4 with 10,000 people in attendance. Almost immediately, residential development began on the south side of the Square, and by 1828 farmers on the north side began subdividing their lots. The closing of the prison in 1829 encouraged even more residential growth, and that year elaborate Georgian row houses appeared around the Square. A sailors’ charitable organization known as Sailors’ Snug Harbor leased the land it owned around the Square to developers who, in 1833, completed the elegant, red-brick row houses at 1-13 Washington Square North.

In 1832, New York University held its first classes for undergraduates in Clinton Hall, a leased building on the corner of Beekman and Nassau streets, near today’s City Hall, while it planned a permanent home “uptown” in the rapidly developing Washington Square area. In 1835, on the northeast corner of the park, the University opened the four-story University Building, clad in white marble and constructed in Gothic Revival style (one of the nation’s earliest examples of its use in educational design).

That year, as it has been written, Washington Square “completed a 30-year transformation from ugly duckling to civic swan.”

Growing with Its Village

From the beginning, New York University was integrated into the fabric of the city. When its University Building opened, NYU leased space to other educational and cultural organizations, including the New-York Historical Society, New York Academy of Medicine, and American Geographical Society. Their presence, in addition to faculty tenants and artists who rented studios in the building throughout the century, played a vital role in establishing Washington Square’s reputation for artistic, cultural, and intellectual prominence.

Within its first 50 years, NYU grew along with Washington Square, opening professional schools of law (1852) and medicine (1841) and founding dentistry (1865) in a leased space farther uptown. These professional and graduate schools would continue to thrive (as they do to this day), but by the 1870s undergraduate education began to suffer. Whereas earlier generations of undergraduates had organized student life through such intellectual pursuits...
as literary societies, debating clubs, and other memberships, students of the Gilded Age wanted a cloistered, pastoral collegiate experience with residence halls and intercollegiate athletics at its heart.

Greenwich Village, meanwhile, was becoming a cramped commercial and manufacturing center. In 1846, 10 percent of the city’s wealthiest 200 men lived above 14th Street; five years later, half of them did. As these wealthy families left the area for fancier neighborhoods farther north, the Village struggled with a rise in crime and poverty. Buildings became tenements, the row houses on Washington Square North were subdivided into multifamily dwellings, and commercial buildings, particularly for the garment industry, began to replace residences on Washington Place, Waverly Place, West Fourth Street, and Broadway. “With no dormitories, no campus, and no athletic teams,” a University historian wrote in the 1930s, NYU “seemed, to the average youth of 1881, a sorry place.” As a result, undergraduate enrollment decreased by half in just six years. By 1881, NYU was on the verge of closing.

1891

As Greenwich Village became more commercial and industrial, and students increasingly sought pastoral college experiences, the University found itself on the brink of closure. To attract more undergraduates, NYU made the decision to open a new campus in the Bronx, University Heights, designed by Stanford White.

A Remote Location in the Bronx

While it was important that graduate and professional schools remain embedded in the commerce of the city, the University’s leaders knew that undergraduates at the time desired a more quiet and spacious collegiate experience. In 1891, NYU made the decision to build University Heights, a pastoral campus in the Bronx. To design the new location, the University hired renowned architect Stanford White (who also designed the Judson Memorial Church and the Washington Memorial Arch and whose father had graduated from NYU). For University Heights, White created a classical campus with spacious dormitories, athletic fields, large lecture halls, and laboratories. Overlooking the Harlem River, elegant buildings were situated around a large quad and anchored by the spectacular Beaux Arts style Gould Library, with 16 marble columns and a dome.

The campus, housing University College and the School of Applied Science, opened in 1896 and reached an enrollment of nearly 1,000 students by 1910. Drawing favorable comparisons to Columbia University, Amherst College, Williams College, and Yale University, the new location provided NYU students with an idealized college environment, a place where scholarly and social life revolved around an academic quad, a central library, and athletics.

The Changing Village

When New York University opened the University Heights campus, it considered moving its original neo-Gothic University Building to the Bronx. That idea proved too expensive, as did plans to renovate the old structure. So in the spring of 1894, NYU demolished the building to begin construction on the 10-story, neoclassical Main Building, now part of the Silver Center for Arts and Science. The building was designed by Alfred Zucker, a prominent architect responsible for numerous ornate buildings in the mercantile district (including nine that the University would later come to own). The University housed its graduate and professional schools on the upper three floors and, to generate income, leased the lower seven floors to the American Book Company, laying a foundation for mixed-use commercial and academic space that continues at NYU to this day.

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Graduate programs maintained a strong presence on Washington Square, including the first graduate school for arts and science in the country as well as a school of business that opened in 1900 offering evening classes to undergraduates. By 1903, a greater undergraduate presence returned downtown with the opening of the Collegiate Division, which, in 1914, became Washington Square College. Even as the Bronx campus thrived, a surge in immigration in the first decades of the century drove enrollment throughout the entire University.

The character of Washington Square was changing again. As manufacturing declined, NYU made its first move to significantly enlarge its holdings and accommodate enrollment growth outside of the Bronx. In the 1920s, the University reclaimed all but two stories of the Main Building from tenants and began acquiring additional property from the commercial and manufacturing buildings east of the Square, including those along the eastern length of the park. In 1928, NYU began construction on the Education Building, located on the northwest corner of West Fourth and Greene streets, the first new construction for the University since the Main Building was completed in 1895. And in 1929, NYU bought the Asch Building (now the Brown Building), site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911.

By its centennial in 1931, NYU had about 40,000 students, making it one of the largest universities in the country. As its Washington Square presence expanded, NYU made a significant decision in 1933 to move its chancellor’s residence back from the Bronx. First located on Fifth Avenue, by 1940 the chancellor’s residence had moved into the row house at 5 Washington Square North, one of three that the University had acquired from Sailors’ Snug Harbor, the original owners, in the early 1930s (and today one of the few to retain most of its original interior details). In 1939, the owners had gutted the houses at 7-13 Washington Square North and converted them into one large apartment building. NYU leased the entire block in 1949, eventually buying it in the 1970s.

The legislation included a program for “slum clearance,” known as Title 1, which allowed cities to acquire properties in blighted neighborhoods, clear them, and then sell the vacant lots at reduced rates to provide financial incentives for redevelopment. Under this ambitious rubric of urban renewal, New York City planners would dramatically alter the landscape of Greenwich Village and of NYU. Within two years of the law’s passage, City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses developed a plan to turn 53 acres and 27 blocks south of Washington Square Park into 10 superblocks. The scheme was eventually scaled back to only three superblocks. A key concept of urban development at the time, the superblock was based on the modernist ideals of French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier, whose urban vision imagined cities...
with high-rise buildings in park-like settings. His influence peaked during the postwar period when urban planners were confronting housing crises and middle-class flight.

Moses’ plan, which came to be known as the Washington Square Southeast redevelopment project, also included the infamous proposal to build a highway through the park. That planned highway, which the writer Lewis Mumford called “civic vandalism,” galvanized a community—starting with a group of mothers, among them, Jane Jacobs—that became the first to promote publicly a contrasting vision of American urbanism: the importance of diverse neighborhoods, public spaces, streetscapes, and pedestrians and mass transit over cars.

In the 1930s, NYU students and faculty had fought off a similar Moses scheme to widen the streets around Washington Square Park. But this time, the University was embroiled in the city’s proposal, which under Title 1 designated a portion of the land for educational purposes. In 1952, NYU named Henry Heald its new chancellor. Heald came from Chicago, where as president of the Illinois Institute of Technology, he had used slum clearance to enlarge significantly its Mies van der Rohe-designed campus. Once in New York, the new chancellor immediately agreed to join the urban renewal plan in the Village, and in 1955 the University acquired the superblock along West Fourth Street, set aside for educational purposes.

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Before NYU broke ground on the towers in 1964, the developers decided to sell to the University the northern superblock on which they had built Washington Square Village. Since Title 1 prohibited them from reselling property at a profit, the developers sold it to NYU for the original price, significantly below market rate. The leases of current tenants were grandfathered in, as the University added the two Washington Square Village buildings to its portfolio of faculty and student housing. The acquisition of these two residential superblocks was a significant move for the University.

Coming at a crucial time in the history of the city and the University, the additional property gains allowed NYU to recruit and retain faculty even as middle-class families fled the city for the suburbs.

While it was the only superblock originally designated for educational purposes, which city planners then believed a crucial engine for urban vitality, and while it was the first one NYU acquired, the land closest to Washington Square Park was the last to be built on. In 1966, with Warren Weaver Hall, and in 1972, with Tisch Hall, major buildings opened on the site. In 1973, the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library opened as well, marking another fundamental turning point for the University. Designed by Philip Johnson and Richard Foster, the red sandstone structure with its towering atrium and mosaic lobby floor consolidated all of the University’s library holdings gathered from 36 spaces throughout the Main Building and other buildings near Washington Square, setting the stage for NYU’s decision to close its University Heights campus. It was a significant step for the University, giving the downtown location a central library, which is essential for an institution committed to higher learning and research.

Depressed real estate values also allowed NYU to make other acquisitions, including an additional loft building east of the Square, between Greene Street and Broadway, and property on the southwest corner of the Square on which it built a new law center in 1951. The latter proposal brought controversy, since the tenements and row houses on the site were home to popular figures of bohemian Greenwich Village. But NYU’s acquisition of land during this dramatic period of city history almost single-handedly secured the University’s future, enabling it to continue to educate students and hire faculty who contribute to a dynamic city.

An Urban Transformation

New York University’s property gains of the 1950s and early ‘60s anticipated a continued postwar boom in student enrollment as the University sought to transform itself into a cohesive academic residential community. But between 1950 and 1975, the city’s population dropped by almost a million people, its infrastructure decayed, crime rose, and corporations and their employees moved to the

![1960](image-url)

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![1973](image-url)

On the original superblock set aside for educational purposes in the 1950s, NYU opened the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library (shown in a model above), designed by Philip Johnson and Richard Foster. It gave the University its first central library outside of the Bronx, consolidating holdings from 36 separate locations scattered around Washington Square, and set the stage for the decision to close the University Heights campus.
By the 1960s, the number of applicants to NYU began to slow. As New York City struggled into the decade of the 1970s, so, too, did NYU. Dependent on tuition and without a deep endowment to help it through tough times, NYU had to take drastic measures. It would have to sell one of its sites or face certain closure.

The 1973 closing of the University Heights campus in the Bronx marked yet another turning point in NYU’s history. Not only did the sale of the campus to Bronx Community College prevent financial disaster—enabling the University to make payroll that spring—but it also represented a recommitment to NYU’s founding principles. It reconfirmed NYU’s unique identity as an urban university without a conventional campus, in the service of its city, and an active participant in one of the most vibrant urban communities in the world.

While the decision was extraordinary—particularly given the condition of the city at the time, only two years before the famous Daily News headline “Ford to City: Drop Dead”—the move would not have been possible without the land gains NYU had made in the 1950s and ’60s. Although the once bucolic campus in the Bronx was not faring well, selling it was a bold and gutsy move. Undaunted by New York’s nearly catastrophic debt and record levels of crime and decline, NYU bet on a brighter future—for itself and its city.

Reinvention and Expansion

By the mid-1980s, the University was losing students to the City College system, which was then tuition-free. NYU had to make another radical move. “We were mediocre,” L. Jay Oliva, former president of NYU, told the New York Times. “You can do well in this world if you’re the best or if you’re the best bargain, but not if you’re somewhere in the middle. We were in a position where we had to grow or die.”

Growth meant that NYU had to transform itself from a good regional university to an outstanding national and international research university. It had to attract top scholars, rebuild crumbling infrastructure, and appeal to a national pool of students. To do so, in 1984, the University launched one of the country’s first billion-dollar campaigns. Within 10 years, it had raised the amount and—in a move unprecedented among universities, which tend to focus on building their endowments—spent most of it to invest in hiring faculty and rebuilding the University.

Aggressive entrepreneurship drove much of the University’s success in the 1980s and ’90s. To generate the resources it needed, NYU employed a number of techniques. It raised tuition, borrowed money, deferred maintenance, and restrained the relative growth of its faculty, physical plant, and administrative support. But perhaps the most significant step NYU took was to increase enrollment. From 1990 to 2005, the size of the overall student body grew by 24.5 percent. Yet even as enrollment increased, so did selectivity. During the same time frame, the undergraduate acceptance rate dropped from 38 percent to 28.5 percent as the average SAT score rose from 1206 to 1369.

At the same time, NYU substantially raised its international profile and presence. In 1994, the University received the gift of Villa La Pietra, a 57-acre estate in Florence, Italy. The bequest by Sir Harold Acton was, at the time, the largest made to a university. Although NYU had centers in 1973

To prevent financial disaster—and to make its spring payroll—NYU sold its campus in the Bronx. Although New York City itself would soon be on the verge of bankruptcy—and with enrollment falling and families fleeing to the suburbs—NYU made the decision to commit to its central location in the Village.

1984-94

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of study throughout Europe since the 1950s, the acquisition of the villa and the establish-
ment of a robust center for international scholarly conferences, undergraduate study, and graduate and faculty research galvanized a growing international profile for the University and its students, a commitment that continues to this day. In the last few years NYU has doubled the number of academic centers abroad, with locations today in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Florence, Ghana, London, Madrid, Paris, Prague, Shanghai, and Tel Aviv. In 2017, NYU opened the Tisch School of the Arts Asia, in Singapore, and announced the creation of a new degree-granting campus in the United Arab Emirates, in Abu Dhabi.

NYU had centers of study throughout Europe since the 1950s, but the 1994 bequest of Villa La Pietra in Florence, Italy, which led to the establishment of a robust center for international scholarly conferences, undergraduate study, and graduate and faculty research, galvanized a growing international profile for the University and its students. Soon, NYU doubled the number of academic centers abroad, which today include (top row, left to right) Madrid, Prague, and Buenos Aires; (middle row, left to right) Shanghai, Ghana, and Berlin; and (bottom row, left to right) Paris, London, and Tel Aviv.

Some of the academic gains came at a steep cost, particularly for the University’s relation-
ship with its neighbors on Washington Square. In order to attract a wider pool of students in the 1990s, at a time when the city’s crime rate was still high, NYU had to provide safe, afford-
able, and comfortable housing convenient to classes and even to create a private transporta-
tion system for University use. In one of the world’s most expensive cities, the creation of new residence halls presented an enormous challenge. From 1990 to 2000, through leasing, acquisition, and construction of residence halls around Washington Square and sur-
rounding neighborhoods from Union Square to SoHo, NYU tripled the number of under-
graduates living in student housing—from 4,000 to 12,000 beds. Today, there are 12,500
students living in 13 residence halls. The growth of NYU’s student population in the Washington Square, Union Square, and East Village areas remains a major concern for the University’s neighbors and to NYU itself, as it seeks to integrate students into the University and the city at large.

Location, Location, Location

NYU draws its life force from its urban sur-
roundings—the magnificent global city that houses and nurtures it, which acts as a rich reservoir of talent, a place that offers the most intellectually energetic people a chance to live in an environment as alive as they are.

NYU’s ties throughout its city have always run deep. Its graduate program in art history, for example, moved to the Upper East Side in 1931, in order to have access to the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1958, the pro-
gram, renamed the Institute of Fine Arts, moved into the James B. Duke House at 1 East 78th Street, where it continues to have important relationships with the Met and other premier arts institutions in the city. Similarly, the Univer-
sity developed a health corridor to accommodate its hospital and medical school in the East 30s along First Avenue. With a presence in the neigh-
borhood since its 1898 merger with Bellevue Hospital (which was later dissolved), the NYU Langone Medical Center today anchors the health corridor, with graduate programs in medicine and dentistry and plans for other related health and science programming.
The School of Continuing and Professional Studies makes good use of its position in two important city locations as well: one in mid-town Manhattan and one in the Woolworth Building in lower Manhattan. These locations, in addition to Washington Square, are easily accessible to the school’s students, most of whom are working professionals, and allow the school to create important relationships with nearby businesses and organizations connected to its programs in real estate, tourism, and philanthropy, to name a few.

In 2008, the New York State Board of Regents approved a formal affiliation between NYU and the Polytechnic University in downtown Brooklyn (now known as Polytechnic Institute of NYU). A crucial step toward a merger, when the Institute will become a school of NYU, the affiliation returns an engineering presence to NYU for the first time since the closing of its University Heights campus in the 1970s.

Despite this long history of engagement throughout the city, NYU has remained most closely affiliated with its location at Washington Square. Its partnerships and affiliations, both near and far, are predicated on a strong central core. NYU has been a part of the Village from the beginning, the two have grown and evolved together and will always remain inextricably linked. From its earliest days, the University’s presence helped make Greenwich Village what it is; likewise, NYU’s location in the Village gives the University an appeal unlike any other institution in the country. Its physical presence in New York City, in general, and Greenwich Village, specifically, forms the basis of what NYU President John Sexton calls the University’s “locational endowment”; its high value helps offset the University’s more modest financial reserves.

But this advantage also creates particular pressures and challenges. NYU cannot grow or operate in the fashion of peer institutions, which have large swaths of land over which they can spread. As NYU remade itself into a national research institution, it was always doing more with less. To some extent, this is a condition of the city—everyone here does more with less space—but for a private university with limited resources, surrounded by historic neighborhoods and zoning restrictions, the constraints have been even more extreme. NYU is landlocked; it controls very little land on which it can build and even what it owns is heavily encumbered by regulatory requirements. At times, the pressure for space led the University to make opportunistic decisions, some of which seem unfortunate in hindsight. Its approach to growth was predicated on numerous problems, foremost among them the University’s dire financial circumstances in the late ‘70s and ‘80s and, even today, its modest endowment. With a per-student endowment that places it in 202nd place among all colleges and universities, the largest private university in the United States is still largely tuition-driven.

Because of these challenging circumstances, NYU’s growth had, in the past, often been unplanned and unreflective. It never felt it had the luxury to develop an overall plan for its buildings or a consistent approach to its property holdings in the neighborhood. As a result, NYU had a sometimes fractious relationship with its community and neighbors. The University was on an unsustainable path—and it was clear that its approach had to change.