

Room for Everyone: NYU Faculty's Green Alternative to "2031"

Rationale:

There is an alternative: *smart growth, principled compromise.*

As scholars and teachers committed to our students, to our Greenwich Village neighborhood, and to the vitality of New York City, we acknowledge that NYU needs more academic space. We do not, however, accept that the NYU 2031 plan, in its current form, offers a compelling or rational solution to instructional needs. The new space needs -- which constitute a small fraction (a mere 18%) of the first ten years of construction -- can be better met by pursuing smart growth strategies (such as refurbishment and repurposing of existing buildings) and by avoiding either admissions-driven or tuition-driven expansion for expansion's sake. *In fact, the NYU expansion plan already lays out some of the seeds of this smart growth, as we elaborate below.*

Why only 18% of academic space up to 2021? Why do we need the other 82%?

No more than 18% of projected new space between 2013 and 2021 (in the proposed, massive Zipper Building and Bleecker Building) on the South Block is devoted specifically to instructional space. Asked by the City Planning Council why the academic space proposed in the plan is so low, the administration explained that the first ten years of expansion relies on "renovation, refurbishment, and construction" of existing space in the Village, along with the recently acquired Forbes Building at 60 Fifth Avenue, to meet NYU's academic space needs. We enthusiastically endorse this smart growth strategy, which lays the groundwork for a principled compromise that preserves the Village even as it meets the academic needs of NYU over the next ten years.

Why then, the massive expansion after 2021?

NYU justifies the new academic space for 2021-31 (in and below the Boomerang buildings on the North Block) by "student need." But that need is driven by NYU's own drive to expand its student population. If the university did not increase the student body (already 20,000-plus undergraduates out of a total of over 40,000) over the first ten years of NYU 2031, we would not need yet more space during the second decade. The expansion-driven admissions and tuition policy is driving phase two -- with increased enrollments being presented as somehow a natural and unstoppable force.

NYU's future as a *Local Network University.*

Our alternative plan follows NYU's own lead in pioneering a future-oriented vision of the university as a network *as well as* a campus; we are also proud of NYU's history as a part of New York City as "a private university in the public service." As President John Sexton has written, "Often, even when in close proximity on a single campus, schools, departments, and units tend to operate in isolation and with a singular focus that makes meaningful cooperation rare." This observation is certainly borne out by the administration's single-minded pursuit of core development at the expense of consultation with faculty or community.

By contrast, Pres. Sexton notes, "a global network university encourages connection to the other parts of the university in a circulatory system... Universities that adapt to this reality will be well positioned; those that choose to do business as usual will be less likely to enjoy a leading role." We heartily concur. Why then, is the administration turning back the clock and proposing a massive "densification approach" in the "core" of historic Greenwich Village, an approach that will destroy the character and open space of its own

neighborhood? We propose an alternative plan that builds on NYU's historic success as a *local* network university by finding a solution for academic space needs near or within a reasonable distance of the "core," in existing space or in our local satellite locations.

There is an alternative to this risky, destructive plan.

The massive scale and estimated \$4 billion plus price tag – and despite the requests of City Council Members and faculty, no business plan has been produced, even at the 11th hour -- of the proposed new buildings do little to add to the academic mission of the university. In fact, the plan risks great financial peril and puts NYU's academic excellence at risk, to say nothing of environmental damage and the dangers posed to the health of local residents, including many of our own faculty colleagues and their families.

We are gravely concerned that NYU's administration will force an unprincipled compromise on the community. To that end we offer the City Council Members the following eight core principles for a smart growth plan. In the spirit of **Principled Compromise**, we offer some examples of the kinds of alternatives NYU could pursue to satisfy its space needs without building on the superblocks, but it is up to NYU's administration to supply the details through proper consultation with the faculty and community.

We respectfully suggest that the City Council Members, under the leadership of Member Margaret Chin and Speaker Christine Quinn, demand an alternative plan from NYU, guided by these principles:

1. **No new construction in the core without showing specific academic need.**
2. **To meet immediate academic needs, repurpose current non-academic space.**
3. **Preserve existing green space.**
4. **No violation of prior land covenants for the superblocks.**
5. **No use of public park strips.**
6. **No up-zoning, and no commercial overlay.**
7. **As a *local* network university, as well as a Global Network university, NYU's students and faculty should use sustainable local transport to travel to class from their dorms and residential accommodation.**
8. **To maintain and, even, increase academic excellence, the growth of the student body must be kept to a minimum.**

These are discussed in more detail in the pages that follow.

A PRINCIPLED COMPROMISE

We respectfully request that the City Council Members, under the leadership of Member Margaret Chin and Speaker Christine Quinn, demand an alternative plan from NYU that follows these principles:

1. No new construction in the core without showing specific academic need.

The NYU2031 Plan reads like a request for a blank check. This is an unfair request, because many of its costs will be borne by students (especially in student debt), by faculty, and the surrounding community.

NYU should provide a transparent accounting of specific needs, and show why those needs cannot be met without building in the core.

For example, we have heard testimony that the Biology department may need new laboratory space for undergraduates. But, assertions of need are not enough. When so much is at stake for the university and for the local community, NYU must be required to show actual – and verifiable -- evidence for those stated needs.

2. To meet immediate academic needs, repurpose current non-academic space.

By its own account in the 2031 plan, NYU can meet its needs for academic space up to 2021 in existing spaces within ¼ mile of the core. The university has 715,000 square feet planned for renovation and repurposing, including: 730 Broadway (142,500 sq. ft.) and the newly acquired Forbes Building (122,500 sq. ft.).

For example, NYU could additionally repurpose academic space in the following buildings within walking distance of Washington Square to provide a ready alternative to the small proportion of academic space (18%) planned for the Zipper building:

The SPCS/ former Fairchild building on 7 E 12th St (13 floors and 122,000 sq. ft) which has nine floors of administration and only four floors of classrooms.

The former Tower Books building at 383 Lafayette Street (37,980 sq. ft) currently used only as an ID center.

The Kimmel Student Center (210,500 sq. ft) on 60 Washington Square South is another large building that could be repurposed for greater instructional use.

3. Preserve existing green space.

As of July 2008, residents in NYU's immediate neighborhood (Community Board 2) had no more than 0.4 acres of open space per 1,000 residents. This is the second lowest ratio in all of Manhattan, where the benchmark is approximately 2.5 acres per 1,000 people. Green space -- especially spaces with mature trees -- must be maintained.

For example, the Sasaki Garden and the Key Park Children's Playground provide needed respite in this tightly packed area of the city. Both of these sites have irreplaceable

mature trees that will be destroyed under NYU's proposal. The Zipper and Bleecker Street building will cast massive shadows on the towers-in-the-park University Village complex and on the La Guardia Community gardens.

4. No violation of prior land covenants for the superblocks.

The superblock area was created under "slum clearance." Plans made when the land was taken under eminent domain were solemn commitments to future generations. The zoning restrictions on building height, usage, and density put in place when Washington Square Village and the Silver Towers were built were based on the "towers-in-the-park" concept, which allowed their erection under the trade-off that there would be ample and accessible open space surrounding them *in perpetuity*.

The "densification approach" (NYU's own term) of construction proposed for the superblocks doubles the FAR density on these residential blocks and threatens to destroy what the NYU 2031 plan itself recognizes as "an eclectic urban collage, an assemblage of building and open spaces that came together in an unplanned sequence."

For example, the towers-in-the-park concept requires that high-density residential construction be offset by surrounding green spaces and low-rise buildings. The superblocks are now recognized as outstanding examples of this kind of balanced use of urban space for NYC: the Silver Towers/ University Village complex built by I.M. Pei was designated as a New York City landmark in 2008; Washington Square Village has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places by the New York State Historic Preservation Office.

5. No use of public park strips.

NYU, a private university, receives generous public subsidy through city property tax exemption, state and federal support for student loans, and state and federal grants and contracts.

Greenwich Village residents should not be asked to sacrifice further to subsidize a private operation by giving over precious public land.

For example, the LMNOP playground was constructed as a grassroots effort by the local community. Families in the community are entitled to continue to use that public land for their own benefit.

6. No up-zoning, and no commercial overlay.

Development has been key to our city's success, but there is a growing sentiment that enough is enough. We need to stop destroying what has made us great. Along with NYU's role as an economic engine comes a responsibility for pursuing smart, sustainable growth for our neighborhood and New York City as a whole.

Greenwich Village is a unique historic, low-rise neighborhood, a jewel in New York City's crown. Yes, there's been much development over the decades, but exactly for that reason we need to cherish and protect what the NYU administration acknowledges is our "local endowment," an unrivalled asset that is crucial to our future success.

The construction jobs generated by NYU 2031 would be generated *anywhere* that NYU decides to build and still benefit New York City and the region. The lasting commercial impact of the plan would be much greater in neighborhoods not already dominated by a university and student presence. NYU can share its positive economic impact with New York City as a whole without needing to overdevelop and ruin its historic core around Washington Square Park.

For example, the "Impacts" report recently commissioned by the Greenwich Village Society for Historical Preservation points out that the maximum projected increase in local retail spending generated by NYU 2031 would expand retail sales by around only 2.5%. They conclude that if NYU built its expansion plans in another area of the city with greater needs for economic development, the economic impact would be far more positive, "both because of the existing economic conditions of those alternate locations, and because development would represent more than an incremental expansion of an existing higher education presence."

7. As a local network university, as well as a Global Network university, NYU's students and faculty should use sustainable local transport to travel to class from their dorms and residential accommodation.

This is good for the environment, good for the City, and good for our health: walking, bicycle-riding using NYU's own pioneering "Bike Share" program, gas-powered trolley routes, or use of mass transit would allow students and faculty to travel sustainably between their residences and the university's various local sites and satellite locations.

For example, a 15 minute walk (at 3 mph), a 15 minute bike ride (at 10 mph), or a 15 minute trolley ride (ave. 20 mph with traffic) would allow students and faculty to travel easily in a radius of between ¼ mile and 1½ miles from their residences to the key nodes in NYU's local university network. A 25-minute subway ride would allow students to travel between the "core" and the satellite campus in Brooklyn.

8. To maintain and, even, increase academic excellence, the growth of the student body must be kept to a minimum.

The NYU student body has grown 30% between 1993 and 2011, and acceptance rates of undergraduates have increased from 15% to over 30% (much higher than our peer universities). At the City Council hearings, the NYU administration testified that they will pursue only 0.5% growth in the student body for the next decade. We enthusiastically endorse a strategy of keeping our enrollments at present levels and making best use of existing resources.

But we are concerned that this target of limited growth will be tested by financial pressures to admit more paying students if NYU needs to come up with 4 billion dollars plus to underwrite NYU 2031.

For example, the number of full-time undergraduates has increased 21% between 2002-2011 (2.1%/year), and the number of full-time graduate students has increased 32% (3.1%/year). This September 2012, the incoming freshman class has a “historic overyield” of 15%, bringing the total to 1600 new students. This overyield, like the previous admissions track record, puts into question the administration’s projected limited student body growth.