Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary

Meeting Date: Tuesday, February 16, 2016, 2:00-3:30PM

Meeting Location: Kimmel Room 406, 60 Washington Square South, 4th Floor

Members in attendance:
Barbara Albrecht, Heather Banoub, Lynne Brown, Jeff Goodwin, Michael Hengerer, Larry Maslon (via phone), Allen Mincer, Erica Silverman

Members Not in Attendance:
Rachel Belsky, Anne Hearn, Neal Herman, Angela Kamer, Arvind Rajagopal, Ezra Sacks, Eero Simoncelli

Invited Guests:

- Urban Farm Resident Representatives
  - Liz Dalton, Silver Towers Resident
  - Professor Bill Easterly, Economics Department, Faculty of Arts and Science
  - Professor Tom Looser, East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Science
- Community Agriculture Club Representatives
  - Christina Ciambriello, Faculty Advisor
  - Malaika Elias, Graduate Advisor
  - Margaret Menzies Weinberg, Co-President
- Steinhardt Representatives
  - Amy Bentley, Associate Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health
  - Jennifer Berg, Director of Graduate Food Studies
- University Plaza Nursery School Representative
  - Niyati Parekh, UPNS Board President
- NYU
  - George Reis, Landscape Supervisor

1. Welcome

Chair Larry Maslon joined the meeting via phone and called the meeting to order. Maslon opened the meeting by reminding the Committee that members from various constituencies of the superblock urban farm and Community Agriculture club would be joining the meeting to have a discussion about their activities on the blocks. Maslon added that he hoped the
discussion would provide the Committee with the facts and preferences of these stakeholders and would help the Committee make recommendations to the University on open space usage particularly as it relates to locating farming and gardening activities.

Lynne Brown, Senior Vice President for University Relations and Public Affairs let the Committee know that Ulrich Baer, Vice Provost for Faculty, Arts, Humanities, and Diversity would not be able to attend the meeting, due to airport delays, but he had written to Chair Maslon in support of the re-instatement of the urban farm, and located it as part of a broader effort Professor Baer was undertaking related to promoting “environmental humanities” at NYU. Brown also noted that Committee Member Jeff Goodwin shared an email from Professor Richard Arum on behalf of urban farm and its benefit to many constituencies, including the residents and the children who attend the University Plaza Nursery School in 110 Bleecker.

2. Housekeeping and Updates

Brown updated the Committee on developments around the superblocks and involving the 181 Mercer project:

• The Office of Community Affairs has started distributing notices about work beginning at Coles. Coles is scheduled to close on Sunday, February 21.
• 404 Fitness is scheduled to open on Monday, February 22. The facility received all required permits and the new exercise equipment has arrived. The Athletics Department has scheduled open house activities and there will be both signage and people welcoming users to the new gym facility.
• Brown noted that her staff is talking to Public Safety about the feasibility of having an additional NYU bus stop near Faculty Housing for residents heading to Palladium to exercise.
• The architects have essentially completed the programming phase for 181 Mercer and are now working on the design elements. Brown said the Committee can anticipate a design presentation from the architects before the end of the semester. A number of Committee members expressed concern that the designs would be unveiled once the University community is already away for the summer, or caught up in pre-Commencement activities and recommended as much information and informational events as possible before May. Maslon recommended the University set up and inform the community now about future open house dates to see the architect’s design progress and the programming elements of the building. Hengerer noted that with exams, students start getting distracted by early May.
• Brown gave an update on communications about the 181 Mercer project, which include the filming of interviews with the architects and future end users of the building about the programming process.
• In response to the Committee’s recommendation that a space be created where people can go to find information about the project, Brown noted that the space where NYU’s Blood Bank was once located (NE corner of Mercer and 3rd) is now vacant. Brown identified this space as a possible location for a model of 181 Mercer and accompanying materials, including videos, to be housed so the NYU and members of the external community can learn about the building. Brown also described creation of a 3D
interactive model that would allow individuals to engage with the design virtually. It was recommended that this resource be available on the project website and Brown agreed it could be located there as well.

- A Committee member asked about when exterior demolition was expected to begin. Brown responded that interior work was scheduled to continue through the spring and into the early summer and the timeframe would be impacted by what the contractors find in the building. Brown reminded the Committee that investigatory borings were still happening around the exterior of the building to inform the foundational design of 181 Mercer.

- Brown let the Committee know that work was progressing on the enhanced public open space on Bleecker Street and LaGuardia Place. These spaces are expected to open in early April. Maslon recommended additional project signs be posted around the site. Brown responded that her design and graphic arts team is developing visuals that can be used on the project construction fences to let the community know about the enhancements underway on the blocks.

- Finally, Brown let the Committee know that the Community Board #2 Arts and Institutions subcommittee asked the University to provide updates about the upcoming closure of Coles and progress on the public open space construction as well as the Mercer Street building at their next meeting, scheduled for Wednesday, February 17. Arlene Peralta, Senior Director of Community Engagement will be giving the Community Board presentation. Brown agreed to report back to the Committee about the meeting.

3. **Conversation about Gardening and Farming on the Superblocks**

Brown welcomed the invited guests from the various superblock farming and gardening constituencies to the meeting. Maslon started the discussion by explaining that the Committee was looking for information on the history and operation of various spaces used for farming/gardening so they had a base of knowledge and could make recommendations to the University leadership the use of space on the superblocks for gardening and farming, the optimal locations for such space, and any needed protocols to ensure the spaces are properly identified and maintained.

Maslon explained that the SSAC was deputized to take feedback from the residents about the project on 181 Mercer Street and ongoing stewardship issues on the superblocks before, during, and after construction, and make recommendations to the University on ways to improve the quality of life on the blocks. The Committee found that many decisions on the superblocks had been made in a very ad-hoc way and they are looking to see the blocks viewed as an organic whole that works for as many constituencies as possible.

Brown started the discussion by reviewing that the temporary permit issued by the Landmarks Commission (LPC) for the urban farm lab on Houston Street has expired. Brown explained that that the University can submit an application to the LPC asking to locate the urban farm at that spot permanently. Professor Bill Easterly asked Brown if 505 LaGuardia Place has a (permanent) permit from the LPC for their garden and if so, recommended that NYU use that garden as a model for their application. Easterly also recommended that the University inform the faculty and their families about the stipulations of living on a Landmarked property so they can
understand the constraints the University is required to uphold. Brown agreed providing that information to residents would help them understand how the LPC works. She will also investigate the 505 LaGuardia plot. Brown added that the Silver Towers complex is unique as it is the only place in NYC where the landscape is landmarked in addition to the buildings.

Professors Jennifer Berg and Amy Bentley from Steinhardt’s food studies department continued the conversation by providing some history about the origins of the urban farm and the community agriculture club. (See attachment.) In 2007, the NYU Sustainability Task Force gave the urban farm a one year green grant to purchase green boxes to farm in the plot of land behind Citibank in the LaGuardia retail strip. The group used an IDA grant and personal funds to continue farming once the funding from the grant had run out and the group worked with local elementary schools in the area to create programming that taught children about growing food. In 2013, the urban farm partnered with the Silver Towers Tenant’s Association and received another green grant, which allowed them to expand and relocate to their current location behind Silver Towers (110 Bleecker) on Houston Street. The move occurred in May 2013 when the LPC temporary permit was granted. When the urban farm lab moved to Silver Towers, the student-run Community Agriculture Club continued planting in the original plot behind Citibank.

Berg and Bentley explained that over the past 10 years the urban farmers have helped to start discussions within NYU and with the local community about the importance of farms and gardens within urban environments like NYU. The farmers are often asked questions by people walking down Houston Street and they feel they have built up good will with the community. Steinhardt has run a class in the space which has been moved to a hydroponic garden downtown in the interim. According to all the participants in the urban farm, it has been a great success delivering education, personal fulfillment, access to children (from the nursery school), etc. In a dense urban environment, it was a model of successful use of green space and helped promote the benefits of urban farming.

The Committee asked if the size of the farm on Houston was optimal and the urban farm representatives said the space had great sun exposure, but more space would always be welcome since faculty demand for garden space is always greater than the amount of space they have. The Committee explained that providing space for one activity means other programming and open space uses are often precluded in that space.

The Committee then asked about the Washington Square Village Tenant’s Association involvement in the Community Agriculture Club’s activities. Berg said the WSVTA was more involved before urban farm moved to Silver Towers. Margaret Menzies Weinberg, Co-President of the Community Agriculture Club then said that the group has been very interested in engaging the WSV community, but as students, they have struggled to understand how to interact with the WSV community.

Brown asked if the two groups could work in one large urban farm, so all people who care about farms at NYU can be on one plot of land. The groups expressed concern in combining plots and Liz Dalton implored the SSAC and University to begin the process for the LPC application as soon as possible. Dalton explained that the space on Houston Street is perfectly
designed and situated for sun, they have a water source, a shed in the garage of Silver Towers for their tools, it is fenced in, and the UPNS is right next door. Weinberg also explained that students learn a lot about personal responsibility and community building through maintaining their garden boxes. Maslon expressed that as a WSV resident he views the Community Agriculture Club’s plot as part of his backyard and he talked about the accountability of the people who use the space in relationship to those who live there. Maslon said that if residents could easily find information about the club’s activities and knew who to contact about maintenance concerns it would be helpful. Weinberg responded positively to these ideas and re-stated that the club was looking to get move involved with the community via engaging the WSV residents. There did not seem to be a general sentiment to combine the urban farm and the student plots; each group maintained their respective plots served different constituencies and needs.

Brown inquired, given the time frame involved in submitting and getting approval for an LPC application, if there was a desire for a temporary location of the urban farm to the area behind Citibank not being used by the students. It was not ruled out but the location on Houston St. remained the clear preference.

Maslon asked George Reis if there are other locations around the superblocks that are suitable for farming and gardening. Reis said that the options are endless if the University would be open to interesting solutions. He expressed that urban agriculture doesn’t need to be permanent, as people engage with edible plants differently than they do with non-edible plants, no matter where they are located.

Niyati Parekh spoke on behalf of UPNS and expressed how beneficial having the urban farm beside the school has been for children that have been able to learn about growing and cooking their own food. She said that the urban farm has provided the smallest children with a nearby outdoor location to use given the closure of the Rocketship play area and the long distance to the Key Park, especially in the winter.

Maslon referenced the Committee’s Quality of Life report’s inclusion of many enhancements to open spaces around the superblocks and the Committee’s goal to make recommendations to the University about the intentional use of open space. Easterly responded by talking about the great ideas, initiatives, and community building that comes out of bottom up activism and organizing; and that top-down planning often kills a lot of the good that comes out of spontaneity.

Bentley reminded the Committee that farming looks different than gardening; that the planting boxes are not always pretty because growing food is not always pretty since it has a seasonal life and sometimes lays fallow. Bentley reemphasized the idea that these urban farms get people thinking about how food is grown and help engage people in an important policy discussion about health and food.

Brown concluded by thanking everyone for attending and for the passionate discussion about the groups’ history and work. Maslon added that perhaps an ongoing subcommittee could be created to continue these discussions with representatives from each group. Maslon and Brown outlined next steps: the committee would confer with Maslon about how they will represent the interests of these groups when they make recommendations to the University leadership in early March and Brown’s
Government and Community Affairs group would think about how to move the LPC application forward, so they are ready to proceed on an expedited basis if that should be the recommendation.