Introduction and Committee Charge

The Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee (SSAC) was established in May 2014 to provide advice to the University and constitute a forum for consultation on quality-of-life issues on both of NYU’s “superblocks” before, during, and upon completion of 181 Mercer Street.

The Committee was established following the recommendations of the University Space Priorities Working Group (USPWG), which issued its final report in March 2014, and the affirmation of the University’s intent and ability to move forward with constructing the 181 Mercer Street building. The SSAC’s work has furthered the USPWG’s principle that the superblocks “…should be better places in which to live: better in terms of their physical environment and better in terms of the relationship between NYU and the community.”

The charge to the Committee includes providing input to the University on:

1. Improvements to the superblocks, including the obligations the University must fulfill under its agreement with the City;
2. The design process, including the feedback on the design of a new building;
3. Overall quality-of-life on the superblocks, including efforts to mitigate the effects of construction, as well as more general quality-of-life concerns; and
4. Ongoing stewardship and communication between the University and the community.

The Committee is composed of seven faculty selected by the Faculty Councils, two students (one undergraduate and one graduate) selected by the Student Senators Council, one representative selected by the Administrative Management Council, and one representative from each of the tenants associations (Silver Towers Tenant Association, University Residents of Washington Square Village, and the Washington Square Village Tenants Association).

The Committee’s administrative ex-officio liaison is Senior Vice President of University Relations and Public Affairs, Lynne Brown. The Committee has been chaired since its inception by Professor Laurence Maslon, of the Tisch School of the Arts and resident of Washington Square Village. Maslon also served as the chair of the Stewardship and Quality of Life Committee of the USPWG.
Silver Towers

Top, © NYU Photo Bureau: Miller; bottom, Kate Lord/New York University

Sasaki Garden
Letter from the Chair

It’s a season of change.

In a university setting, seasonal change becomes particularly apparent; the fall not only brings falling leaves and all too many pumpkin spice products, but students and schedules, too. This fall is an excellent opportunity to share with you the constructive change on our superblocks over the last five years.

There has been an abundant amount of change. I’ll defer to the rest of this report: the progress on the 181 Mercer building; the designation of open spaces and appropriate and attractive signage; the restoration and upkeep of a variety of landscape spaces (with increased accessibility and usage); the implementation of a robust and inventive programming component; biannual Open Houses; and a general sense of pride and community.

But even change needs to be changed—that’s called “evolution” and that’s where you come in. The University has supported the efforts and the mission of the Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee by providing organization and funding for these initiatives; it has reached out its hand, but that compels residents of the Superblocks to reach out our hands as well, as active participants in building and sustaining our community. I’m pleased to say we have three engaged tenant organizations: the Silver Towers Tenants Association, the Washington Square Village Tenants Association, and the newly constituted University Residents of Washington Square Village Tenants Association (the latter has a Facebook site that’s very helpful and worth joining). Go to their meetings, share your thoughts with them, and query them for information—each group has a representative on our larger Committee.

You can be active participants in other ways: contact the Client Services Center directly if you have questions or problems (we love our doormen, but we shouldn’t expect them to be official conduits of information); attend our Open Houses (there will be one in December) and other public meetings; be an advocate for the protocols of the Superblocks (e.g., if you see someone violating the rules about pets—outside or even inside—you can gently point to the signs we now have posted around the blocks).

These massive blocks—however densely populated and complex—are our homes; above all, enhance them, embrace them, enjoy them, as they are the locus of our ever-evolving community.

— Laurence Maslon
Arts Professor, Associate Chair, Tisch School of the Arts
Chair, Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee
Architect Selection
The Committee was involved in every stage of the 181 Mercer Street architect selection process during the spring of 2015. This began with advising University leadership on a set of guiding principles which were used as criteria for selecting an architect. The Committee emphasized the importance of design excellence, experience in designing buildings in a dense urban environment, responsiveness to context, and high standards of environmental sustainability. The selection process culminated in the University’s selection of Davis Brody Bond and KieranTimberlake.

Evaluation of Restrictive Declaration by Independent Consultant
The USPWG’s March 2014 final report, in addition to recommending the establishment of a stewardship committee, also advised that NYU engage an independent consultant with expertise in community impacts of construction projects before any construction begins. According to the report’s recommendation, the independent consultant would assess whether the procedures outlined in the Restrictive Declaration were adequate and examine any construction plans for both short- and long-term effects on the neighboring community. To fulfill this recommendation, a subcommittee of the SSAC worked with the NYU Office of Construction Management to select STV, Incorporated as the independent consultant in spring 2015. STV produced a comprehensive report that compared the requirements in the Restrictive Declaration with the relevant aspects of city, state, and national regulations (i.e., code and best practices) and has recommended any enhancements where applicable. The analysis concluded that the Restrictive Declaration sets forth construction performance conditions that meet or exceed city and state requirements and some national standards for construction impact mitigation. The analysis also concluded that the Restrictive Declaration provides for a conservative approach to construction, which incorporates reasonable measures to reduce potentially negative effects on quality of life for residents, pedestrians, and businesses surrounding the project site.

Building Update and Timeline
Construction of the 181 Mercer Street building began in spring 2017 following the decommissioning and demolition of the Coles building. “Core and Shell” work, which includes the construction of the building structure and façade, is currently underway, and is expected to continue with the enclosure of the building in spring 2021. The new multi-use building is expected to be substantially complete in late 2021 and open in fall 2022. It will house much-needed new classrooms, performing arts education and training spaces, a modern athletic facility, student and faculty housing, and approximately 7,500 square feet of space for a public atrium and community uses. The project also includes the creation of a number of open spaces including the future Greene Street Walk and Toddler Playgarden. The Bleecker Street Landscape, Fiorello La Guardia Park, and relocated Mercer-Houston Dog Run were previously opened as part of this project.
MMNY Translucent Borders event

Superblocks signage

The Urban Farm along Houston Street

Translucent Borders. © Siezak; Courtesy of NYU Photo Bureau

Urban Farm. Kate Lord/New York University

Translucent Borders. © Hollershead; Courtesy of NYU Photo Bureau

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Superblock Enhancements

In previous reports the Committee highlighted its work to enhance the quality of life on the superblocks: this included policy guidance around the creation and use of the open spaces around both Washington Square Village and Silver Towers. Open Space policies were guided by the premise that the superblocks are a single, unified entity that should provide an outdoor space for complementary uses and constituencies; by allowing a use in some areas, it would be acceptable to prohibit it in other areas. With this approach, the needs of most of the user groups living in and around the superblocks can be accommodated and respected. With new, attractive, and integrated signage, those needs and policies can be clearly presented and understood by all user groups.

Capital Improvements

With the SSAC’s input and counsel, NYU has supported a number of enhancements around the superblocks: underwriting memberships for dog-owning residents of the superblocks to the Mercer-Houston Dog Run, located east of Silver Towers I; permitting and construction of an Urban Farm on the south side of Silver Towers I along Houston Street; creation of The Backyard, a multi-use lawn space that is open for superblock residents to use and hold events, such as children’s birthday parties; creation of new areas for dogs along the Washington Square Village driveways and on Bleecker Street; redesign of The Sideyard, an agriculture club space; the enhancement of the Sasaki Garden with improved plantings and entrances; and removal or replacement of damaged fences, improved lighting, and plantings around the Washington Square Village block.

Signage

A major initiative of the SSAC, the signage and wayfinding program memorializes open space and other policies, facilitates pedestrian and vehicular wayfinding, and includes historical and site information to instill “pride of place” and ease of movement for superblock residents and visitors. The Committee also recommended the use of digital screens to broadcast news in the WSV and ST elevators and lobbies.

Programming

The Committee also recommended hiring a director to oversee a series of events to celebrate the outdoor spaces, build community among residents, and provide activities for all audiences. The series of events, called NYU Faculty Housing Happenings, serves about 2,700 superblock residents annually and has featured seasonal and cultural celebrations, movie nights, block parties, social mixers, performing and visual arts programming, events for children, family sports, and adult fitness activities.
Future Neighborhood Projects

Traffic Calming
In conjunction with the Washington Square Village and Silver Towers’ tenants associations, the SSAC advocated for the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) to implement traffic calming improvements on West 3rd Street and Bleecker Street between Mercer Street and LaGuardia Place. The DOT has committed to installing improvements on West 3rd Street as part of a larger project that includes 3rd and 4th Streets between 6th Avenue and Avenue D following the completion of ongoing street work.

Mercer Playground
The Committee recommended the University work with the NYC Department of Parks, residents of the superblocks, and the neighboring community to consider the enhancement and programming of the Mercer Playground. Mercer Playground is under the jurisdiction of the NYC Parks Department and runs along Mercer Street from Bleecker to West 3rd Street. As part of the University’s Core Plan approvals, NYU agreed to contribute specified funds to the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation to update and maintain this space. In spring 2019, the NYC Parks Department, Council Member Margaret Chin, and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer held a public meeting, including several members of the SSAC and superblock residents, to discuss ways to improve Mercer Playground. The input provided at the meeting will be used by the NYC Parks Department to develop conceptual designs that will be presented to Manhattan Community Board 2 in fall 2019 for public review.
This report was created by the Superblock Stewardship Advisory Committee (SSAC).

This is the fifth report of the SSAC. Past reports can be found at nyu.edu/university-initiatives/ssac.