



Testimony of the Municipal Art Society  
Before the Manhattan Borough President  
By Katie Kendall, Ralph C. Menapace Fellow  
Regarding Community Board 9's 197-a plan; Columbia University's 197-c action; and  
the West Harlem Special District  
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The Municipal Art Society of New York is a private, non-profit membership organization whose mission is to promote a more livable city. Since 1893, the Society has worked to advocate excellence in urban design and planning, contemporary architecture, historic preservation and public art. In 1989, the MAS created the Planning Center to support and provide assistance in the creation of 197-a plans and to find ways to strengthen the role of 197-a plans in the city's overall planning process.

I am Katie Kendall, the Ralph C. Menapace Legal Fellow, speaking on behalf of the Municipal Art Society. MAS is pleased to submit comments on Community Board 9's 197-a plan; Columbia University's 197-c action; and the West Harlem Special District. Because the review process in this case is so important, complex and ground-breaking, we will limit our comments today to that subject.

We believe that Community Board 9's 197-a plan effectively and creatively balances neighborhood need with citywide goals, and that the community was able to accomplish this through a consensus-driven process whose power and legitimacy derives from the city's charter. This 197-a plan marks a historic first - it is the first one to be completed since the announcement of PlaNYC 2030. PlaNYC helps identify city-wide planning priorities and provides principles by which communities can begin addressing future growth and development and their relationship to the city's needs as a whole. The community's plan addresses growth giving special attention to the need to expand and improve access to housing, community facilities, open space, jobs and public transportation services. In short, we believe this plan deserves to be adopted because it both represents community consensus about the future of the neighborhood, and because its recommendations move New York that much closer to the implementation of the city's sustainability agenda.

This is the first time a 197-a and 197-c plan have been brought through the review process at the same time, allowing another historic opportunity to use the public review process to reconcile a land use action with a community-generated blueprint for

neighborhood growth. This allows for a coordinated process between the community and Columbia that is transparent and participatory. Furthermore, the 197-a implementation benefits from the forward thinking West Harlem Special Zoning District proposed by the Borough President, which seeks to preserve and stabilize the area outside of the Columbia expansion footprint.

The challenge before the public and decision-makers is that the 197-a plan and Columbia's Expansion Plan are contradictory visions. The Municipal Art Society has an enormous respect for Columbia University and we recognize that the venerable institution is a stakeholder in West Harlem and has a clear and real need to expand. Our hope is that through real dialogue between the community and Columbia, changes can be made to both the 197-a and the 197-c plans that would accommodate Columbia's growth while being guided by the community's planning goals.

How can we achieve a goal of unified plans? We commend the community board for the accommodations it makes in the Manhattanville portion of the plan to:

- Increase FAR and height;
- Increase Community Facility bonus;
- Allow for great flexibility in rear and side yard setback requirements;
- Create flexibility in the sky plane exposure requirements;
- Allow for optional manufacturing uses; and
- Allow for construction on sites currently owned by Columbia.

We urge Columbia to work with the community as a stakeholder. We do believe that Columbia and the community working together could create a better urban design solution. While Columbia has a grand vision for an urban campus, it is important that the new development be knitted into the existing urban fabric. This is no small task, but it seems possible that if Columbia adopts some of the goals of the 197-a plan, including maintaining more of a mix of old and new buildings and some mixture of uses, the plan would be improved.

We urge the community and Columbia to work together to establish a common vision for Manhattanville. We are very grateful for the Borough President's work to continue to bring those parties together. We will continue to develop our analysis on Columbia's expansion plans and present our findings to the City Planning Commission.