



Center for Buildings, Infrastructure and Public Space

CBIPS COMMENTARY: IN THE HEIGHTS (October, 2018)

BACKGROUND

The Center for Buildings, Infrastructure and Public Space seeks to identify how best to design, construct, and manage buildings, infrastructure and civic spaces, emphasizing social impact, sustainability, and resilience in addition to cost, schedule, quality, and safety. We search for ways to create and connect legacy buildings, needed new infrastructure, and planned public space development to improve the quality of life. In so doing, we pursue ways to catalyze economic success and urban innovation to help define the future of cities. It is also the aim of the Center for Buildings, Infrastructure and Public Space to provide a platform for the promotion of scholarship and innovation in civil engineering, architecture, urban design, construction technology, real estate, finance, city planning, historic preservation, and their allied sciences and arts. CBIPS will also seek to foster dialogue and collaboration among engineers and other design and construction professionals together with city planners and policy makers both within and beyond Columbia University. To that end, the Center Fellows met with NYC Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez in his Washington Heights district office and discussed his 2030 Vision for Washington Heights, Inwood and Marble Hill. This outline commentary focuses on ten broad topics that we hope will guide further discussion and research.

OPEN SPACE

The Plaza de las Americas, is a car-free pedestrian market street on a one-block stretch of West 175th Street between Broadway and Wadsworth Ave. It is home to both the second oldest ongoing green market in New York City and a household goods market serving neighborhood residents. As with any food market, a key question is what is being sold and at what price point? Can the farmers market be responsive to culturally-specific needs? How do the markets complement the new seating, paving, artwork and other urban design features?

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

In a borough and city reeling from gentrification and displacement, public officials including the Mayor and members of the City Council have struggled to create policies and programs to incentivize the development of new and preserved affordable housing. A good part of the controversy over the recent Inwood Rezoning had to do with concerns about attracting new development that featured market rate housing and commercial space. How can the character and demographics of a district be retained? What is the regulatory situation and local economic state?

EDUCATION

Educational opportunity is the springboard to future economic success for every immigrant and for every child of immigrants. In neighborhoods with significant numbers of people new to New York, how does the school system and the public libraries meet the needs for basic education and information, the development of language skills and vocational and career training, but also the preparation of community members for engagement in the new high-tech economy?

What is the role of universities in the community, from medical education to other forms of outreach and initiative?

TRANSIT

The transit infrastructure of New York City and its metropolitan region provides connection beyond the Heights to places where jobs and education beckon. How can Washington Heights, Inwood, and Marble Hill become a destination without displacement, a place where jobs, innovation, and new opportunities are created? What are the lessons to be learned from the development of commercial space at the Port Authority's George Washington Bridge Market/Mercado? How can the subway stations in the community be more accessible? Are there other new opportunities?

SMALL BUSINESS RETENTION

Just as increases in residential rents change the character of a neighborhood's housing, even without demolition or new construction, so too do increases in storefront commercial rents drive out mom-and-pop stores and create vacancies while landlords wait for a bank branch or drugstore to meet new market rates. How could legislation support market economics as well as the preservation of community character? How can neighborhoods help incentivize retention of needed services and familiar shops?

IMMIGRATION

New York has been a sanctuary city since the early 17th century and continues to welcome those seeking political asylum, safety from repression, and economic opportunity. With US immigration policy shredding the welcome mat and closing doors to those with problems of documentation, community resources providing access to legal services and other recourse can be matters of life-and-death. How will a proposed Immigration Research Center complement existing initiatives and what is the economic basis for reaffirming the welcoming gesture of public space?

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Health disparities including increased rates of asthma, obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases have demonstrable correlation to the urban demographics of family income and quality of housing. How do the health statistics of Washington Heights, Inwood, and Marble Hill relate to such data, as well as recreational opportunities and access to healthy food? Do food markets such as that at Plaza de las Americas adequately provide information about general well-being?

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WORK FORCE

In any city, and particularly New York, a key strength and potential risk pertains to the work force. It is vitally important, for example, to structure the workplace to enable women – and men too - to better be able to juggle the responsibilities of job and home. There are issues of gender-based salary disparities in the work force and a need for much greater flexibility assuring a better work-life balance for two-income families. How can new jobs be created without generating displacement of community members.

INFRASTRUCTURE

With the George Washington Bridge by Othmar Ammann, its bus terminal by Pier Luigi Nervi, and the High Bridge aqueduct by John Jarvis, The Heights has benefited by engineering acumen and civic infrastructure investment. More recently an MTA rail yard and repair shop and Sanitation Department district garage have chewed up significant land that could be used for other purposes. How can technology and creation of new opportunities for housing and commerce be developed in the area?

WATERFRONT

The Inwood Rezoning designates certain city-owned land along the waterfront for affordable housing development. How will these sites be knit back into the fabric of the city? What types of uses revitalize resilient urban waterfronts for all? How do waterfront development efforts relate to the lessons of superstorms and hurricanes from Katrina and Sandy, to Maria and Michael? Is waterborne transportation connection feasible?