CHAPTER 7 - NEIGHBORHOOD ANALYSIS

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The Morningside Heights neighborhood exhibits a notable consistency in its fabric. Most of the buildings were built during the same decade and the many highly visible and important institutions create recognizable patterns of scale, age, and building types throughout the neighborhood. At the same time, however, there exists within Morningside Heights a diversity of building styles, uses, and scales which varies from street to street. The often peculiar juxtapositions which exist along these streets sometimes contribute to the general character of the neighborhood and at other points detract from it. This analysis examines various physical, historical, and economic factors which contribute to the complexity of the Morningside Heights neighborhood, including land use, ownership patterns, open spaces, and circulation routes.

7.1 NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTERISTICS

The Morningside Heights neighborhood is distinctive for both its physical characteristics as well as its architectural qualities. A low ratio of buildings to open space within the confines of a densely populated neighborhood can be attributed to the concentration of institutions located in Morningside Heights, of which Columbia University is the largest. Other institutions, such as Union Theological Seminary, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Barnard College, Teachers College, and the Jewish Theological Seminary also have buildings with open courtyards or parks. The monumental design and scale of many of these buildings is in sharp contrast to the rest of the neighborhood. The distinctive towers of Riverside Church, Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine are prominent on the skyline. The presence of these towers adds to the rich mixture of buildings within the neighborhood, a reiteration of the description “the Heights.”

The majority of the buildings in the neighborhood were built during the first decade of the twentieth century. Large pre-war apartment buildings define the outer edges of the neighborhood along Riverside Drive, Claremont Avenue, Broadway and Morningside Drive. In the center, institutional buildings of a monumental scale define the physical heart of the neighborhood. The northern end of the study area is marked by modern high rise apartment buildings, and to the south, smaller scale apartment buildings line the side streets.

7.2 PHYSICAL OVERVIEW

The area is bounded to the east by the dramatic slope of Morningside Park, which extends from West 110th Street north to West 123rd Street. Morningside Drive is sited along a ridge overlooking West Harlem. To the west, Riverside Park forms another “green” boundary which is also characterized by dramatic topography. Riverside Drive slopes upward to the north. The two major parks and the changes in elevation as one proceeds north are defining characteristics of the Morningside Heights neighborhood, differentiating it from other neighborhoods in the city.

The high elevation and the dramatic dropoffs offer spectacular views of the city to the east and Riverside Park to the west. West 116th Street extending east and west from College Walk is marked by exedral monuments at both ends which serve as focal points for these view corridors. The ample open space of the parks east and west of the neighborhood is supplemented by an unusual abundance of institutional “green” spaces, large public and private parks, and open spaces.

When superimposed over the topography of the area, the street grid becomes irregular, and the boundaries created by the topography and the parks create the curvilinear edges of Morningside and Riverside drives. The irregular street grid also produces long north-south blocks, primarily occupied by institutions and larger apartment buildings, in contrast to the shorter east-west blocks south of West 116th Street.
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Legend
- 10-foot contours
- Major Morningside Heights institutions
- Predominant ridge through Morningside Heights

Morningside Heights Topography

Exhibit 7-1
7.3 LAND USE

Morningside Heights has a high concentration of institutions, including Columbia University, Barnard College, Teachers College, Union Theological Seminary, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Riverside Church, Interchurch Center, the Manhattan School of Music, St. Luke’s Hospital, St. Hilda’s and St. Hugh’s School, Bank Street College of Education, and International House, as well as several neighborhood churches. The development of the neighborhood relied heavily on the growth and prosperity of these institutions and the land use patterns reflect this development history. The institutions form a band from the northwest to the southeast corners of the neighborhood, occupying both the center as well as the edges. As can be seen in Exhibit 7-2, a large percentage (27%) of the area is residential, intermixed with smaller institutions, such as schools and religious structures. Three large high rise complexes, Morningside Gardens and the two sections of the General Grant Houses, all built in the 1950s, occupy the northeastern corner of the study area. Retail use is limited primarily to ground-floor stores along Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway. The blocks north of West 125th Street and west of Broadway consist primarily of buildings used for parking, automotive, and industrial use. However, it is the open space in Morningside Heights, including Riverside and Morningside parks, that comprises the largest area of land use at 33% of the overall acreage. This includes Riverside and Morningside parks, as well as the numerous gardens and courtyards throughout the neighborhood.

7.4 OWNERSHIP PATTERNS

A more telling description of the neighborhood and its composition can be seen by comparing land use and ownership patterns. The institutional uses of the property are limited primarily to the interior portion of Morningside Heights, much of the surrounding neighborhood falls into the category of institutionally owned real estate (IRE). Much of this land exclusive of city-owned streets and parks is held by private institutions (25%), including Columbia University. Of this, institutions other than Columbia own approximately 15% of the Morningside Heights property with Columbia owning the remaining 10%. Columbia’s property holdings are concentrated in the areas adjacent to many of the other institutions, while private and public property is located predominantly in the southern and northern edges of the neighborhood as residential and commercial buildings. Major institutions with holdings outside their campuses include Columbia, with off-campus real estate holdings throughout the neighborhood, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and Saint Luke’s Hospital.

The overlap between the patterns of land use and ownership illustrates the amount of off-campus property owned by these institutions for residential uses. Many of Columbia’s Institutional Real Estate buildings are located close to the main campus for faculty and student housing. The majority of the land area devoted to housing in the neighborhood, however, is privately owned (16%), mostly in the form of rental and cooperative apartment buildings.
7.5 OPEN SPACE

The open space in Morningside Heights is one of the neighborhood’s most distinctive features. Variations in size, type, and accessibility of open space make the neighborhood unique in New York. These open spaces range in size from the expanses of Morningside and Riverside parks, to many smaller parks, playgrounds, church yards, the campus open spaces, St. John the Divine Park, as well as the imaginative uses of residual spaces by Morningside residents and institutions.

Morningside Park and Riverside Park, which frame the neighborhood, are the largest of the public open spaces. Designed by Olmsted and Vaux in a picturesque style in the 1870s, these parks offer spectacular views and extensive active and passive recreation. They are clearly defined by tree-lined streets and dramatic topography. Sakura Park, located south of International House, is a small city park, and Straus Park is a complement to the Broadway malls.

Many of the open spaces within the boundaries of neighborhood institutions are open to the public. The parklike setting of Columbia’s main campus is one of the most heavily used spaces in the neighborhood. The southern two-thirds of the property surrounding the Cathedral of St. John the Divine is publicly accessible. Several playgrounds associated with the public schools in the neighborhood are open to the public. Private open spaces consist primarily of interior courtyards associated with the institutions. Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary, Teachers College, and Riverside Church all have private interior courtyards. Several community gardens, such as those on Amsterdam Avenue at West 111th Street and West 119th Street are maintained by neighborhood residents.
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The sunken residential courtyard at Amsterdam Avenue between West 111th and West 112th streets is a secured open space accessed from adjacent residential buildings.

Straus Park at Broadway and West 106th Street intersection has been recently renovated by the New York City Parks Department.

Sulzberger Plaza at East Campus is an active open space functioning as a forecourt to Wien Hall.

The enclosed court with Epstein’s Madonna and Child at Riverside Church is a passive open space visible from Claremont Avenue.
7.6 PEDESTRIAN TRAFFIC

Due in part to the concentration of institutions with many visitors and the density of the neighborhood, there is significant pedestrian traffic in Morningside Heights. Exhibit 7-5 illustrates the observed pedestrian routes in the neighborhood. Broadway serves as the primary north/south pedestrian route. From West 116th Street south, street life is particularly active, both during the day and evening. Many of the institutions in the neighborhood are located along Broadway. Three subway stops on Broadway serve the neighborhood, adding to the significant pedestrian traffic along the street. West 116th Street running from Riverside Park through College Walk and east to Morningside Drive is one of the major east-west pedestrian arteries in the neighborhood. This corridor links both the major thoroughfares and the parks and passes through the central portion of the main Columbia campus.

Pedestrian/vehicular conflicts along Broadway and Amsterdam are caused primarily by pedestrian traffic to and from the main Columbia campus. Two locations are of particular concern. The first is under the pedestrian bridge over Amsterdam Avenue, where dim lighting and fast-moving traffic create a potentially dangerous situation. The actual number of incidents at this intersection is low, perhaps due to the perceived risk caused by the high speed of traffic on Amsterdam Avenue and poor visibility created by the hill. More accidents have occurred at the crossing of West 116th Street and Broadway, where College Walk begins. Pedestrians leaving the Columbia campus are lulled into a perception of security based on the absence of vehicular traffic on the campus as well as the presence of the Broadway malls midway across the street. This has led to increased jaywalking and a number of serious accidents.
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Exhibit 7-5

Legend
- Major Pedestrian Routes
- Minor Pedestrian Routes
- Subway Stations
- Pedestrian/Vehicular Conflicts

Note: Analysis is based on empirical observations, October 1996.
7.7 VEHICULAR TRAFFIC

Vehicular traffic in Morningside Heights is served through the major north-south two-way arteries of Broadway, Riverside Drive, and Amsterdam Avenue, which is two-way north of 110th Street. Below 110th Street, Amsterdam is one-way northbound. Southbound traffic on Amsterdam Avenue is channeled east and west on West 110th Street and west on West 111th and 113th streets, contributing to the high volume of traffic on the cross-streets in that area of the neighborhood. Other streets which provide traffic in two directions east and west are 120th and 125th streets. West 120th Street is an exceptionally wide street which has room for diagonal on-street parking, yet carries a relatively light volume of traffic. All other streets in the neighborhood alternate one-way traffic, with eastbound traffic typically on the even-numbered streets and westbound on the odd-numbered streets.

The volume of traffic appears to be heaviest on Broadway, Amsterdam Avenue, Riverside Drive, West 110th Street, and West 125th Street. Broadway traffic is often quite fast, creating the dangerous pedestrian conflicts previously noted. The same is true on Amsterdam Avenue, where less vehicular traffic generates more consistent, and higher, speeds. Because of the irregularity of the street grid in portions of the neighborhood, several streets, such as Morningside Drive, Claremont Avenue, West 116th Street and a few side streets, are not through streets, thus traffic volume is less and speed more limited. Exhibit 7-6 illustrates vehicular traffic in the neighborhood.

7.8 MASS TRANSIT

Public transportation in Morningside Heights is ample, consisting of both subway and bus service as illustrated in Exhibit 7-7. The neighborhood is served by three MTA New York City Transit #1 and #9 stations on Broadway at West 110th Street, 116th Street, and 125th Street. At West 122nd Street, the subway becomes an elevated rail line, and the 125th Street station is an elevated platform. A total of eleven bus lines service the neighborhood connecting to points south, east, and north. The M60 line provides bus service via West 116th Street and West 125th Street between Morningside Heights and La Guardia airport.
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Exhibit 7-6

Legend

- High Traffic Street
- Light to Moderate Traffic Street

Note: Analysis is based on empirical observations, October 1996

Vehicular Traffic
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Mass Transit

Exhibit 7-7