

Transformative Transit-Oriented Development: Creating a New Heart for East Harlem (Spring 2015)

Within a mile of Columbia's new Manhattanville campus, tucked under the Park Avenue rail viaduct, sits one of the more dilapidated pieces of active rail infrastructure in Manhattan: Metro-North's 125th Station. Each day, hundreds of passenger trains rumble along the viaduct that connects Grand Central Station to the South with the wealthy bedroom communities of Westchester to the north. Some are express trains that breeze past the station at high speed, but most stop noisily above the small station building - discharging or embarking commuters on narrow platforms suspended high over Park Avenue.

Despite its four-minute connection to Grand Central, the 125th Street Metro-North station is a world apart from its sister station to the south. Retail offerings for passengers are entirely absent. The site's historic features, including the original platform and footprint, are hidden a floor below the dimly lighted ticketing/waiting area. A disused and crumbling set of former toilets sits opposite the station entrance, and the blocks to the north and south of the station are unwelcoming at best. The street intersection that defines the station footprint is confusing and dangerous. Onward connections are hard to find: the nearest subway connection is a long block away and taxi queuing is an entirely random event.

Yet there is a dramatic opportunity to transform the station - from the eyesore it is today into the heart of a revitalized East Harlem. Development activity along the 125th corridor is strong, including adjacent to the station. New traffic and bus patterns along 125th St have been implemented by DOT to improve east-west access. A rezoning proposal for East Harlem is being developed by the Department of City Planning, encouraged by the community's own rezoning proposals. And the MTA is now formulating plans for the next phase of the Second Avenue Subway, which could connect the 125th St station directly to the long-awaited east side subway line.

This course will examine the opportunity to transform a focal point of East Harlem by reinventing the station as part of a transit-friendly hub linked directly to midtown, LaGuardia and the west side of Manhattan by rail, road and bridge. Value-capture mechanisms and public-private partnerships will be examined; so too will creative urban design using portions of the existing rail infrastructure. To develop proposals, the class will engage directly with those that now determine the station's fate: Metro-North and the MTA, developers of sites adjacent to the station, the Community Board and local merchants, and the city agencies (in particular DOT and DCP) that control development at the site.

Because of the multidisciplinary nature of the opportunity, students of real estate, urban planning, urban design, and historic preservation are encouraged to apply. Those with an architecture background are also welcome, as the class will be invited to represent new ideas to the MTA and City as part of the curriculum.

Curriculum Overview

I. Understanding Transit-Oriented Development

January 22: Intro to Transit-Oriented Development

January 29: TOD New York style: subway bonuses, the #7, etc. (*MTA real estate speaker*)

February 5: Transit retail: Visit to WTC/Fulton Centre (*Westfield*)

II. The 125th Street Opportunity

Feb 12th: 125th Street and Harlem development

Feb 19: Metro-North operations and precedents (*Randy Fleischer*)

Feb 26: Community Board: plans and views (*Matthew Washington*)

March 5: Property owners and merchants (*Nina di Martini*)

III. Proposals and Visions

March 12: DCP and DOT: East Harlem rezoning, SBS and other (*city panel*)

March 19: no class

March 26: Second Avenue subway visit (*MTACC*)

April 2: Site proposals and visioning

April 9: Value-capture mechanisms, financing and zoning

April 16: Presentations to client organizations (*EDC/DCP/Metro-North/DOT*)

April 23: Community charette (*UMEZ and CB 11*)

April 30: Wrap-up/final class