

How Not to Build A Symbol

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Architecture

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ARCHITECTURE creates symbols; this is one of its functions. There is a symbol going up right now in Morningside Park: the new Columbia University gymnasium. But this is not the kind of symbol anyone wanted. It stands for one of the more disturbing problems of our troubled times—the deep and bitter split and many-layered misunderstanding between a privileged urban university and an unprivileged community—a division that the Ford Foundation has hopefully given Columbia \$10-million to heal.

No one is neutral about the building. The university sees it as an exemplary, badly misunderstood town-gown gesture. Its opponents see it as a too concrete instance of the university's rigid physical and emotional isolationism, even when making a gesture toward the community.

It is actually a definitive, demonstration of an institutional failure to comprehend and react to the human and urban attitudes and feelings that surround it. These are partly university-engendered and partly symptomatic of the times, but they have very real and inescapable meaning for the university's future planning and its tenuous community and city relationships. The story of the gym is one answer to what has gone wrong on the Heights. It is both symbol and object lesson.

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The controversy revolves around two basic factors: whether or not the gym belongs in the park, and the nature of its dual school-community uses. In the heat of the fight, hardly anyone has looked at the building itself. It is a blockbuster. It will cover two acres of Morningside Park, reaching, with its entrances and terraces, virtually from top to bottom. (Its defenders say it will make more "usable" land, help make the park safe, and form a bridge between the university and the neighborhood. Its critics call it an invasion and violation of public park land.)

There will be three upper levels reached from Morningside Drive, above, consisting of standard academic athletic facilities for Colum-

bia. One lower level, entered from the bottom, will contain sports facilities for community use. Entrances are separate. There is no connection between the two at any point. (Two separate buildings in one, the university explains, with Columbia paying for both and giving one back to the city for public use. Separate and unequal, say its foes: Gym Crowd.)

And so it goes. The university is accused of getting bargain park land and cutting its costs with a nominal \$3,000 a year lease. The administration answers that it is actually taking on a \$3 million plus responsibility to build and give away the community gym and provide the community athletic program at a cost of \$75,000 annually. The building is estimated at \$12-million, of which \$1.6-million will go for the community facilities. Columbia's complaint is that nobody mentions its full financial contribution.

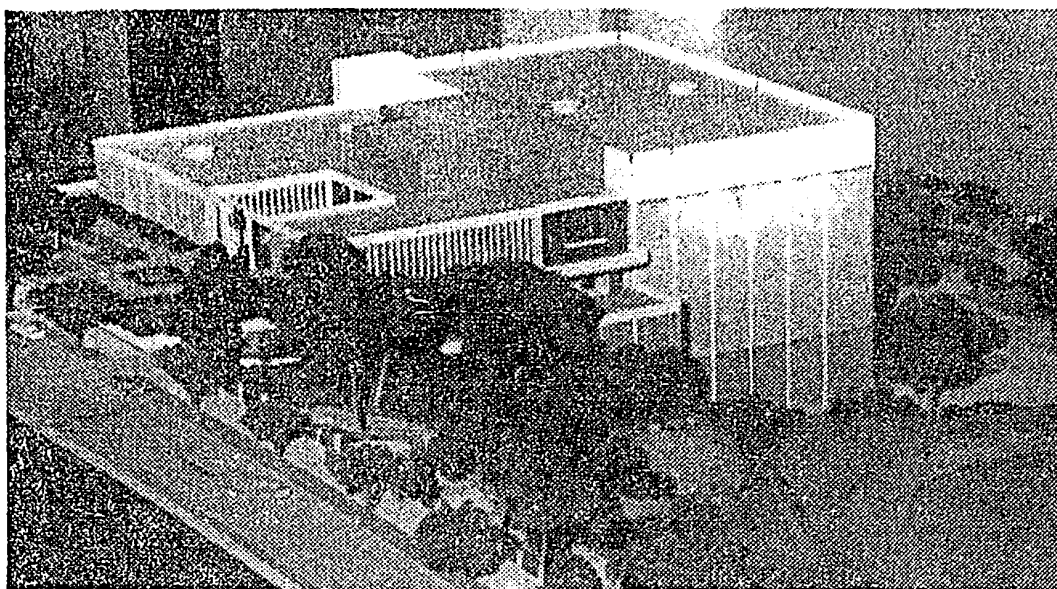
Nor does anyone mention, administration spokesmen point out, the immensely successful, university-sponsored program that has been going on in the park for neighborhood children for the last 12 years that the community gym will extend to a year-round, full-time activity.

The university's facilities will be too small and outmoded as soon as they are finished, claim its foes. The administration's reply is that the building is not meant to serve all 18,000 students. It is for 3,800 undergraduates. When the new gym is completed, says Jackson Smith, a compact Olympic swimmer who also happens to be the designing architect for the firm of Eggers and Higgins, "it will be the best in the country."

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The administration claims that it is backed by the community "except for a few troublemakers who are not in Harlem; they are on the Heights." It is certain that the community wants the gym. "It is our number one building project," says Columbia, officially. "It will prove itself in use."

It does not take much investigation, however, to find that both community groups and university faculty are



Model of Columbia University gymnasium in Morningside Park

sharply divided. A kind of noblesse oblige keeps some high-placed dissenting faculty members from speaking up in what would be a virtual vote of no confidence in the administration. Research undertaken as one of the first Ford grant activities found that most Harlemites have never even heard of the project.

Altogether, it is an undertaking not notable for sensitivity. It is certainly not going to be a particularly sensitive building. Although the front elevation on Morningside Drive has been reduced to a level 27 feet to make it less obtrusive than in earlier schemes, the huge masonry bulk will never blend with its rustic setting. It is in conflict just by being there.

Attempts have been made to minimize mass by studying divisions in the virtually windowless walls and by breaking up the brutal, 126-foot-high rear facade in the park with three materials—a base of park-type stone, a center section of buff brick and a top of concrete aggregate. But you can't disguise an elephant or a building in a park. While thought and care have gone into the architectural treatment, the result cannot be characterized either as inspired or sympathetic to its site.

Insensitivity has been the crux of the matter from the start. It has been "too late" for this project for at least eight years. The die was really cast with the first questionable decisions.

Faced with predictable violent opposition to relocation that would have come with normal site selection, the unpopulated park looked like an irresistible alternative. There was a "good purpose" to justify its use. Park erosion, of course, is always carried out for a

good purpose. The history of the despoliation of parks and the loss of precious urban open land can be charted by good purposes. Add the problem of crime, and good purpose becomes sanctified procedure.

Fired by good intentions, the university ignored clear warnings. Opposition came immediately from civic groups on the grounds of park encroachment. Encouraged by then-Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, who was always known as a doer rather than a community sympathizer, the project was pushed ahead.

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In 1960-61 it was pressed through a series of actions necessary to legalize its transgressions, including public hearings, that amounted virtually to a joint railroad-ing by city and university. Authorization for this kind of use of park land, which is held in trust by the state for the city, must be given by the State Legislature. It cannot be obtained without a home rule message from City Council and Mayor, and then there must be a two-thirds vote of each house of the State Legislature and approval by the Governor.

These are necessary community safeguards, and they were all systematically abrogated for the university in spite of rising community opposition. After this appalling enabling legislation was obtained, a lease was signed between Columbia and the Parks Department, represented by Commissioner Moses's successor, Newbold Morris, and approved unanimously by the Board of Estimate.

To Columbia, these steps are proof of the scrupulous correctness of its proceedings. To a large public that has helped throw the parks

policies of the Moses era out of the window, the procedure is proof of the outrageousness of what has had to be protested and abolished.

At the time of the lease, the building plans were included in the agreement. Visibly disturbed today by the accusation of "segregated" school and community facilities, Columbia says that it was "locked into" the present plan by the 1961 lease.

The real tragedy of the whole Columbia gym affair is that this dubious and even harmful project has been carried out in good faith. It is not the product of a monstrous and evil deviousness ascribed to the university by its enemies. The institutional mentality is not diabolical. It is simply grossly imperceptive. It has meant well and behaved with consummate wrongheadedness.

Certainly the problems are not simple. The urban university is doomed to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of community and vested interest. Whatever it decides, it is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't. And there will always be town-gown conflict, intensified by the urban crisis.

But Columbia still seems to want it both ways. It feels justified in using public parkland for a building that is perhaps one sixth for public purposes, and in its heart it still thinks of itself as a privileged private club generously conferring certain optional, peripheral philanthropies. Today's university can never play that part again. It cannot avoid an involved and responsible role in its troubled neighborhoods. Unless there is a significant change in the basic understanding of this incapable and critical community relationship the Ford grant program is doomed to failure.