

# 600 Acres of Trouble

## *Morningside, City's Top Renewal Area, Is a Crucible of Crime and Creativity*

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Morningside General Neighborhood Renewal Plan is not only New York's biggest renewal plan for its largest single project area, but also probably contains the greatest number of the pressing problems that plague today's cities, on the largest possible scale.

The plan covers 600 acres of trouble, ranging from the deteriorating surroundings of a galaxy of educational institutions long known as the Acropolis of America, to the most sordid slums.

It is these 15 major institutions, which include Columbia University, the Union and Jewish Theological Seminaries, St. Luke's Hospital and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, that make this area different from any other urban renewal area with similar problems.

They are concerned with urgent needs for expansion and the establishment of a safe and stable environment to which students and staff can be attracted. They believe that renewal efforts are imperative if the extraordinary complex of educational, religious and medical facilities with their essential services to the city is not to go down the drain with the neighborhood.

### Problems More Difficult

These institutions and their needs make the problems more difficult and the response to them more irrational than in any other neighborhood bent on rebuilding itself.

The case is a classic one of town versus gown, or the academic community versus the local residents, complicated by the involved factors of typical urban decay in the mid-20th century.

These factors are overcrowded and substandard housing, a mixed and deteriorating social base, crime, beautiful but unusable parks, faulty street layout and inadequate community facilities.

The highest-priority item, which the city plans to attack in the first phase of its program, is housing. Substandard conditions have come about through congestion, age and that real-estate phenomenon known as Single Room Occupancy, which generally denotes the highly profitable breakup of old apartments by slum landlords into one-room units.

### Family Life Affected

It also invites the breakdown of family life and a pattern of transient occupancy with a large percentage of the socially incompetent or undesirable.

Single Room Occupancy, or S.R.O., has, in addition, become a euphemism for assorted establishments of unsavory character or purpose. Morningside Heights, Inc., a nonprofit organization that represents the institutions in the area, spends \$100,000 a year for private street patrols.

Crowding and crime have wrought a change in the community's social fabric, which was once predominantly white, middle income and middle class. It is now a mixed, noncohesive group with an influx of what welfare spokesmen call the "socially weak," consisting of the poorer and less privileged ele-

ments of the white, Puerto Rican and Negro population.

Two movements that fed on each other to further the community's disintegration were the postwar wave of Puerto Rican immigration and the simultaneous flight of middle-class whites to suburbia. An influx of real estate speculators, as property deteriorated, completed the process.

Those trapped in the process are the remaining stable families and older residents, who are divided between fear and resentment of renewal with its threat of removal from the neighborhood, and a desire to see the area upgraded.

In no renewal area has there been a greater aura of suspicion and mistrust, except, perhaps, in the West Village, where Jane Jacobs fought renewal to a standstill.

The Morningside neighborhood is dominated by institutions and a quarter of its population is connected with them.

### 'Secret Plans' Attacked

The remaining three-quarters contains a rather frightened and vocal group that accuses the institutions of making secret plans and of monopolizing the ownership of property. There is a firm, local belief that the outsider is an inevitable candidate for eviction as the institutions expand.

This feeling is strongest in the blocks just around Columbia University, which are ambiguously designated in the present program as institutional and-or residential, and for which the city has no plans. The university is expected to develop the plans, which begs the issue for suspicious residents, or rather, closes it in their minds and leaves an unresolved area of conflict.

Columbia is the largest builder in the area, and local hostility has not been eased by its carrying out an expansion program of singular architectural insensitivity. This, in turn, affects the character of the environment.

### An Architectural Compote

That character is extremely mixed. It ranges, in housing, from old-law tenements to middle-aged apartments and, in official building, from the largest modern-Gothic cathedral in the world to a potpourri of the collegiate, serviceably banal or aggressively stylish.

The greatest problem that the Morningside renewal plan faces, however, is one that cities have been notably unsuccessful in solving: the relocation of the dispossessed.

More than 6,000 people will be moved by rehabilitation or rebuilding and the correction of overcrowded conditions. Whether they can be properly rehoused or—if custom is followed—the poor and those who present social programs will be pushed from one fringe area to another, remains to be seen. The city has been concentrating on improving this operation.

This particularly Herculean effort may well be the measure of success or failure of urban renewal in human and social terms. And it is in these terms, ultimately, that the art and science of planning must be judged.