Columbia’s Manhattanville Campus: A Model of Sustainable Neighborhood Development

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Columbia University’s Manhattanville campus expansion in West Harlem recently achieved Stage 1 Platinum certification under the LEED for Neighborhood Development pilot rating system. The 17 acre site, a former industrial neighborhood, was targeted for redevelopment by university officials tasked with addressing one of the great challenges facing many institutions of higher education today: how to effectively grow its physical identity as it looks to expand its educational offerings. The project team had the added challenge of finding a way to achieve this goal within the dense confines of New York City.

Located just north of Columbia’s historic Morningside Heights campus, the Manhattanville expansion will include 6.8 million square feet of additional space for teaching and research, as well as underground parking and support services. The project is coordinated by a university-led planning team along with two world class architecture and planning firms, Renzo Piano Building Workshop and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Priorities included achieving the highest levels of energy efficiency, neighborhood connectivity, and walkability, while establishing a thriving local economy and strengthening ties to the surrounding community. The platinum score reflects Columbia’s commitment to sustainable development, and solidifies its role as a leader among institutions of higher education. The Manhattanville campus is the first LEED-ND Platinum certified pilot project in New York City and the first Platinum certification for a university campus expansion plan nationwide.

Columbia University President Lee C. Bollinger commented on the project, saying: "We are proud to have earned the LEED Platinum recognition for sustainable neighborhood development. This is a milestone for Columbia not only because we are building a future in our home community in New York, but because we are doing so with a commitment to the best urban planning principles and the highest quality architecture that reflect both the core values of city life and the fundamental need for a more sustainable society. I want to thank the leadership team at Columbia Facilities and everyone at the University who works every day to fulfill our commitments to environmental sustainability, energy efficiency and civic responsibility."

Sustainable campus planning is a unique opportunity for institutions to further their commitment to their students. Raising stewardship of the environment and the importance of connected communities into the public eye itself becomes a learning opportunity – though Manhattanville will include state of the art science and research facilities, mere habitation and interaction with the sustainably designed space will broaden student and educators' understanding of the world and their relation to it. In this way, Manhattanville will be a true living laboratory. Like any institution built to last, the planning team at Columbia has effectively answered the question of how to best serve the students of tomorrow, today.

The first phase of the project has already broken ground, and in spite of some controversy along the way, it remains on schedule to open in 2015.

The U.S. Green Building Council has tremendous resources for colleges and universities considering growing their institutions in sustainable ways. For more information on how to use the LEED-ND rating system for campus planning purposes, consult the LEED for Neighborhood Development on Campuses guidance document.

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