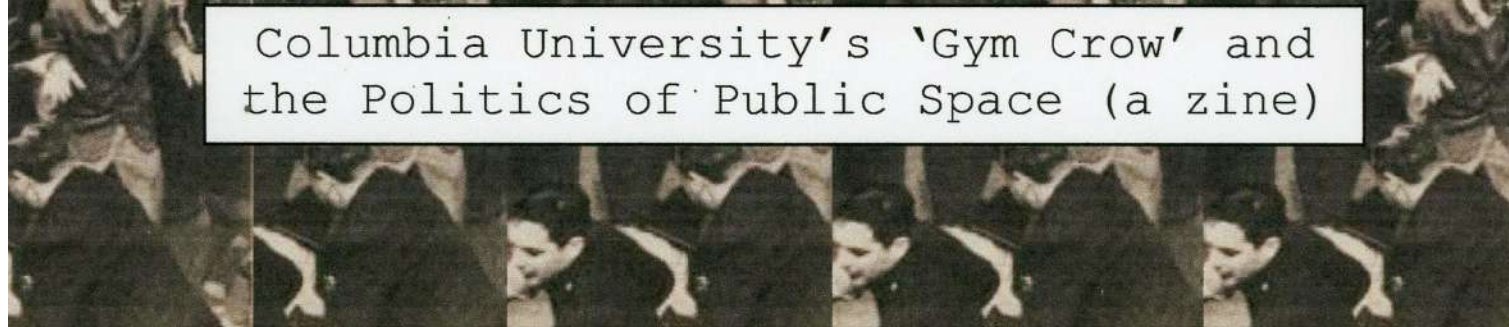




Columbia University's 'Gym Crow' and
the Politics of Public Space (a zine)



This project was originally written as a senior thesis at Carleton College, entitled "Columbia University's 'Gym Crow' and the Politics of Public Space.'" Like a big dumb nerd, I loved my content, and spent about a year in total in the archives, researching, and writing the thesis itself. But as an aspiring public historian, I was worried by the future of what I'd created. What's the use of a 42-page thesis with 8 pages of endnotes if nobody actually wants to ever read it again?

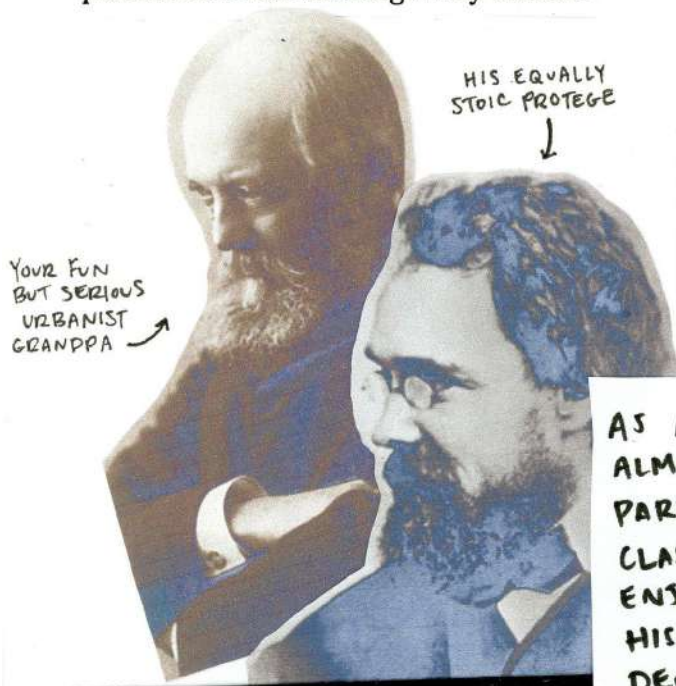
With that in mind, I wanted to create a different version: something that kept the perspective, information, and complexity of the work I'd spent months on, but that had a fundamentally different feel to it. Something that readers might actually enjoy spending time on.

I don't totally know who the audience for this zine is, and I think that's okay. Even though a bit of my academic jargon's still in here, I want almost anybody to be able to pick this up and think, okay, I get it. This is a story about power and community and resistance (and a little bit of failure); universal themes that jump off the page. The point is that there's a story here that's about Columbia and urban renewal and community power and Morningside Park all in one, and what I want to do here is show you how and why they all come together.

So you know what you're getting into, this zine is about Columbia University's attempt to privately lease a corner of Morningside Park and build a racially exclusionary gymnasium on the land. It's about who uses public space, who claims public space, and what public space historically meant in Morningside Heights.

Thanks to my parents for letting me come home for a month and steal their rubber cement and printer ink. Thanks to my friends and loved ones and professors for being patient, receptive audiences and not telling me this was a bad idea. Thanks to the Schomburg Center and the Tamiment Library and Columbia University's institutional archives for giving me a lot of amazing visual materials and a lot of anti-institutional passion.

In 1887, architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Morningside Park as a public site of recreation and relaxation for the people of Morningside Heights. The architects' design seemed impossible to some, quite literally carving a green space for the public out of the existing rocky terrain.



When Olmsted and Vaux first designed the park, the area was largely undeveloped farmland. But grounded around the influence of Columbia University, the neighborhood's largest institution, Morningside Heights blossomed into a hub of arts, culture, and higher education by the late 1940s.

AS A COLUMBIA DAILY SPECTATOR ARTICLE WOULD NOTE ALMOST 70 YEARS LATER, "OLMSTED DESIRED THEM [CITY PARKS] TO BE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE OF DIFFERING CLASSES AND BACKGROUNDS COULD MEET, SHARE, AND ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY AND EXPERIENCES. IN HIS OWN WORDS, PARKS WERE 'A DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGHEST SIGNIFICANCE.'"

OLMSTED AND VAUX (GRANDFATHERS OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE)

Within the geography of Morningside Heights, Morningside Park exists as a meeting space and a dividing line. With Columbia University's campus as the central point, it spans the neighborhood, dividing West Harlem and Morningside Heights.



As Black and Puerto Rican communities migrated into Morningside Heights and West Harlem in the postwar period, white communities turned toward the suburbs. Caught between the tides of demographic change, Morningside Park became an urban public space marked by conflict, not democratic coexistence.

* FYI, ALL VISUAL CITES ARE IN THE BACK. SORRY! NOBODY WANTS TO READ ALL OF MY NOTES ANYWAY, I PROMISE YOU THAT.

Before we get into the importance of Morningside Park to the neighborhood—and oh, *will* we get into it—it's impossible to talk about big concepts of 20th-century urban public space and development without talking about **urban planning, urban renewal, and tenant power.**

Let's tackle urban planning first. The post-World War II era prompted massive changes in urban planning design ideals, as American urban planners envied European planners' ability to redesign bombed-out cities from a totally blank foundation. Instead, they innovated a system of "artificial demolition," demolishing existing buildings to create a blank slate in the city.

THE STARS OF NYC URBANISM



JANE JACOBS, DEFENDER OF THE CITY (MY GAL!)

MAYOR ROBERT F. WAGNER, DEVELOPERS' ALLY

LE CORBUSIER, FRENCH MODERNIST ICON

ROBERT "POWER BROKER" MOSES

THIS REALLY WASN'T AS GREAT OF A PLAN AS THEY THOUGHT

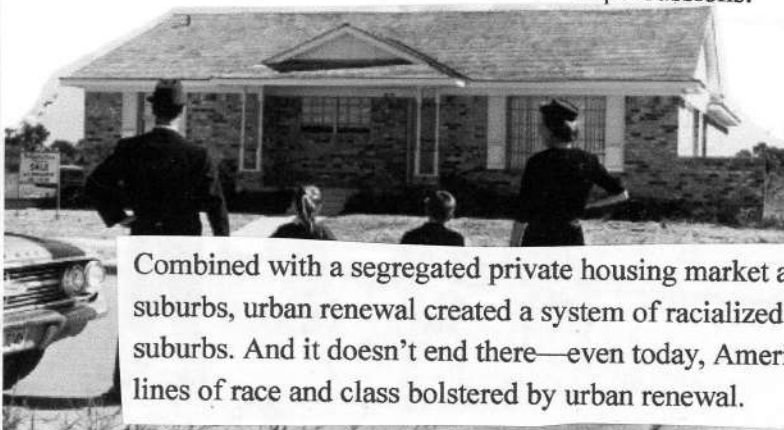
THREE MAJOR PIECES OF LEGISLATION ALLOWED THE REDEVELOPMENT OF AMERICA'S CITIES TO THRIVE:

- 2) The **1954 Housing Act** sets up white homeowners' access to Federal Housing Administration-funded mortgages. Practices of redlining and discriminatory lending in Black neighborhoods, unsurprisingly but unfortunately, meant that communities of color saw few benefits.

- 1) The **Housing Act of 1949** created the system of urban renewal and the formula for developers: 1) defining an area as "blighted" or "decaying," 2) acquiring the property through eminent domain, and 3) incentivizing private investment and redevelopment. The private and public sector, here, started to operate hand in hand.

- 3) The **1956 Interstate Highway Act** supposedly addressed the problem of urban congestion and skyrocketing postwar American automobile consumerism. Sure, it created the interstate system, but it came at the expense of building expressways through Black neighborhoods with little to no repercussions.

NONE OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS SERVED TENANTS OF COLOR



WE WANT WHITE TENANTS IN OUR WHITE COMMUNITY

y.s. the suburb are historically racist, coming a shock to almost nobody

Combined with a segregated private housing market and "white flight" to America's fledgling suburbs, urban renewal created a system of racialized spatial segregation in America's cities and suburbs. And it doesn't end there—even today, America's central cities are organized around the lines of race and class bolstered by urban renewal.

According to institutions like Columbia, urban renewal would “better” the neighborhood. If you were a member of the community, not a Columbia development advocate, that often meant something wildly different. More often than not, “improving” or “rehabilitating” neighborhoods like Morningside Heights meant claiming urban land from communities of color, evicting them from their homes and apartments, and whitening the neighborhood.



replacing BLIGHT

with

GOOD HOMES

There's also no doubt that competition between elite higher education institutions, like the Ivy League schools, took on new importance after World War II. A potent combination of rising postwar consumer opportunity, the baby boom, and the GI Bill's provisions for returning World War II veterans to attend college made America's universities important sites of national and global power.

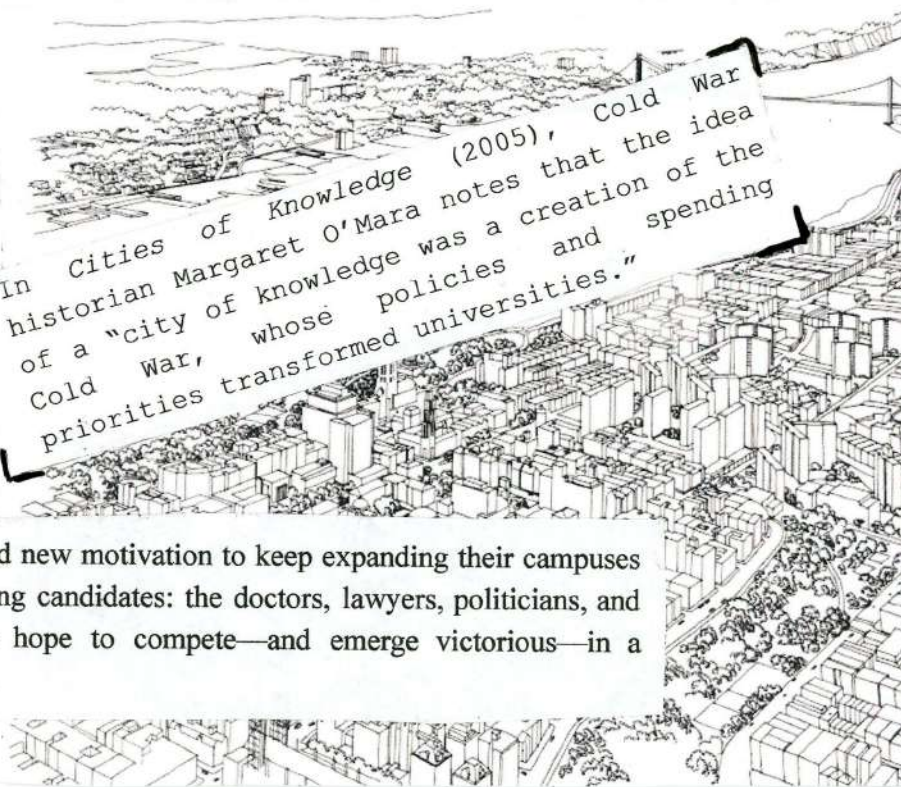


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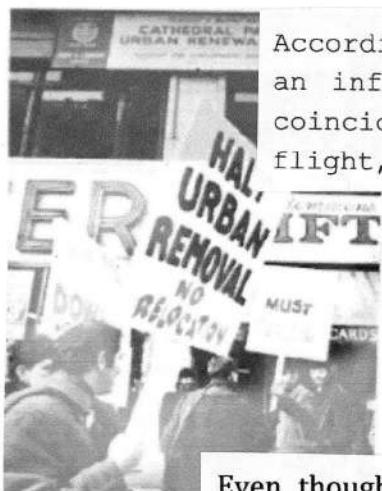
- MARGARET O'MARA, *CITIES OF KNOWLEDGE* (2005)
- STEVEN CONN, *AMERICANS AGAINST THE CITY* (2014)
- ROBERTA GOLD, *WHEN TENANTS CLAIMED THE CITY* (2014)
- MICHAEL CARRIERE, "FIGHTING THE WAR AGAINST BLIGHT"
- STEFAN BRADLEY, *HARLEM VS. COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY* (2009)

In *Cities of Knowledge* (2005), Cold War historian Margaret O'Mara notes that the idea of a "city of knowledge" was a creation of the Cold War, whose policies and spending priorities transformed universities."

Ivy League universities, like Columbia, had new motivation to keep expanding their campuses and land holdings to attract promising young candidates: the doctors, lawyers, politicians, and leaders that were liberal America's best hope to compete—and emerge victorious—in a precarious Cold War geopolitical landscape.



At the same time, educational institutions anchored in neighborhoods like Morningside Heights grappled with changing racial dynamics: less white than ever before.



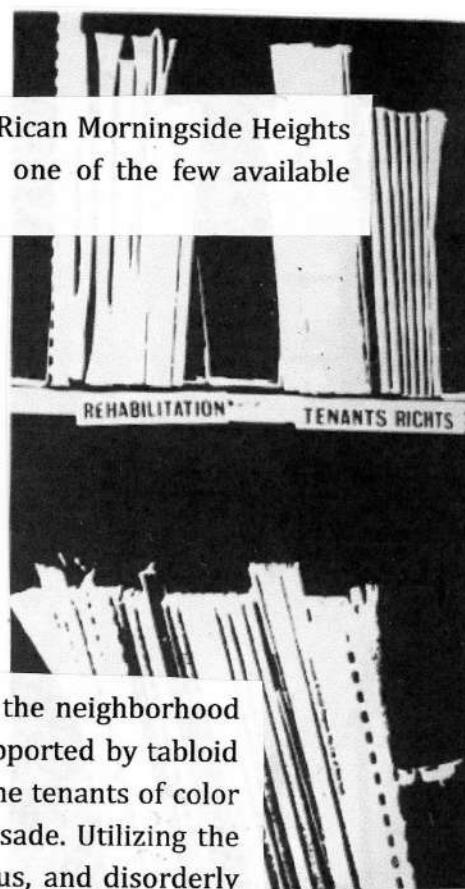
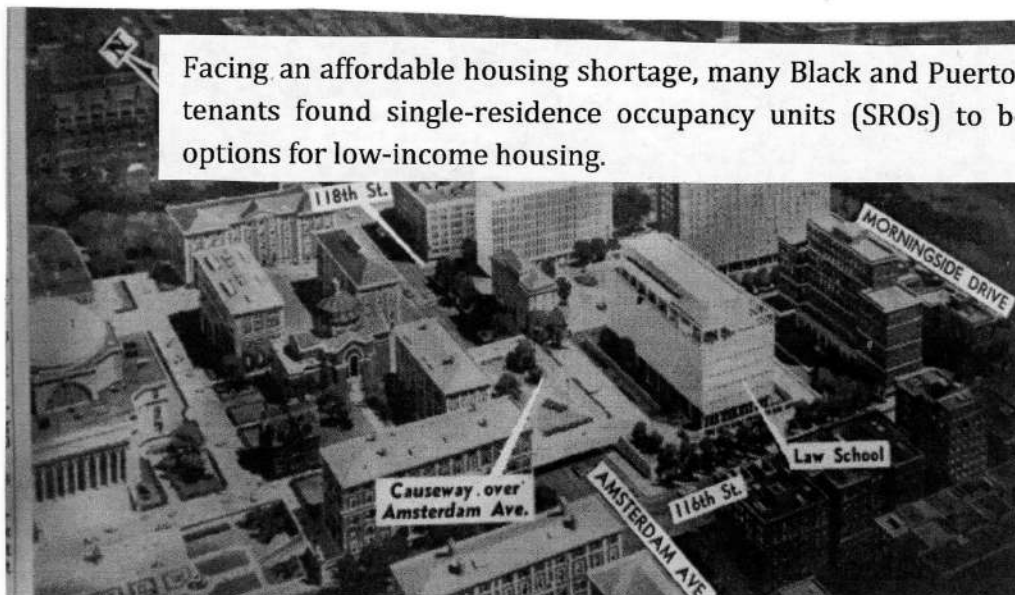
According to historian Roberta Gold, these “new New Yorkers” were an influx of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans whose arrival coincided with massive waves of urban decentralization, white flight, and suburbanization.

and say, “we won’t move!”



Even though the suburbs grew and sprawled during the 1950s, urban areas were in trouble. White-collar jobs surged for white communities that stayed in the city, but corporate and trade migration to the suburbs transformed the face of urban manufacturing. Denied training and education for skilled blue-collar work or entry into the booming white-collar sector, Black and Puerto Rican labor in Morningside Heights was cast into service work or low-wage, non-union work. Instead, they often provided the manpower to execute institutional expansion.

Facing an affordable housing shortage, many Black and Puerto Rican Morningside Heights tenants found single-residence occupancy units (SROs) to be one of the few available options for low-income housing.



But to Columbia’s ambitious urban planners, tasked with redesigning the neighborhood (and its tenants), SROs were often portrayed as the *seed of chaos*. Supported by tabloid reports of drug use and sexual impropriety in SROs, evicting low-income tenants of color from SROs became a project of racial cleansing marked as a moral crusade. Utilizing the language of urban renewal to describe buildings as blighted, dangerous, and disorderly provided the necessary legal framework to enact slum clearance policies.

These moves, of course, came at the expense of massive rounds of tenant eviction from Columbia-owned properties. According to community statistics, almost 10,000 tenants were displaced by the end of the 1960s. Even though Columbia's official relocation policy stated that the three reasons driving tenant relocation from Columbia-owned buildings were "non-payment of rent, needs for academic buildings, or needs for faculty-student housing," their policy language hid the racial dimensions of displacement.

To Columbia, claiming land in Morningside Heights might control the threat of racial disorder. Using classical urban renewal guidelines of density, decay, and blight—supposedly value-neutral designations that had intense racial connotations—restoring urban order became synonymous with human displacement.

Historian Stefan Bradley draws similar conclusions about blight's racial implications, suggesting that to Columbia's urban planners, "the arrival of so many blacks and Puerto Ricans 'dirtied up' the once clean (white) group of Morningside Heights residents."

Columbia's prized faculty and staff were leaving the city in droves in the late 1950s, relocating to suburbs or looking for jobs in "less dangerous" locations.

**BIG TAKEAWAY:
DON'T TRUST ANYONE
WHO SAYS URBAN
RENEWAL WAS A
VALUE-NEUTRAL PROJECT**

Afraid of a massive exodus, the university responded by redoubling their expansion efforts. They began developing new facilities (residential, academic and athletic) that 1) would attract the "ideal" student and faculty body and 2) that would necessitate the displacement of "undesirable" populations.

When Mayor Robert F. Wagner introduced the Morningside General Neighborhood Renewal Plan (MGNRP) in 1964, the mayor claimed the project "represents a landmark in comprehensive planning and programming for renewal of a very large area in our City, and a major advance in my constant battle for a city free of slums." In reality, the MGNRP would raze (and supposedly replace) a massive amount of low and middle-income housing in Morningside Heights and West Harlem.

THERE IS SO MUCH TEXT ON THIS PAGE, SORRY. IT'S IMPORTANT! I PROMISE!

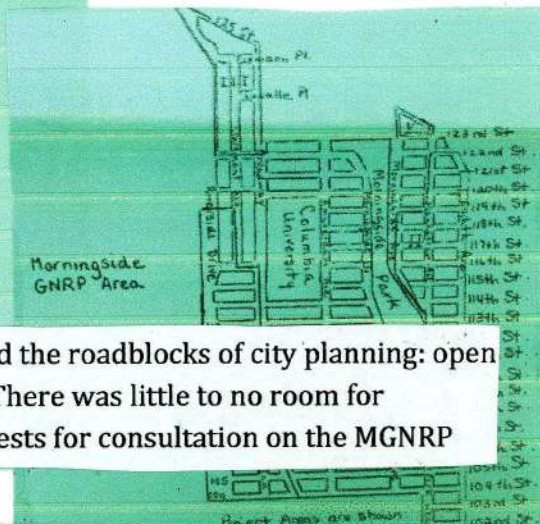
the MGNRP is an important case study. It'll come up again later on.

Columbia's interests and the city of New York's interests in development were often similar, and the university's friendly relationship with city agencies often allowed them to avoid zoning restrictions. But the MGNRP proposal was an exception to an otherwise comfortable relationship.



TAKE A LOOK AT THE STATS. THEY'RE *WILD*

Project Area	Total Pop.*	Non-white pop.*	Total no. of Households	Estimated no. of households to be displaced **
I	27,208	7,611	11,819	4,250
II	14,998	14,898	4,977	3,800
III	4,859	1,192	1,660	200
IV	23,732	11,675	8,441	4,000
Excluded Areas***	27,468	9,972	10,825	3,300



Private development on Columbia's terms often avoided the roadblocks of city planning: open hearings, zoning regulations, and bureaucratic delays. There was little to no room for community input, despite neighborhood activists' requests for consultation on the MGNRP plans and other institutional expansion projects.

Columbia fought to reroute the MGNRP's boundaries around Columbia's campus, excluding eleven development projects and fourteen Columbia-occupied city blocks and leaving that space available for the university to develop themselves.

It's no coincidence that among other projects, the way the MGNRP boundaries were laid out allowed Columbia to turn their attention to Morningside Park, a space regarded as blighted—but socially, politically, and economically valuable—by Columbia's urban planners. They recognized the central location and the public nature of the park as important to multiple communities in the neighborhood, and desired to revamp and control it for a predominantly white, middle-class Columbia audience.

Edward Solomon, the president of Morningside Heights, Inc. [Columbia's real estate front] once said in reference to Morningside Park that "the feared jungle may become our greatest asset."

YIKES

YIKES

Yikes! The racial connotations of the "feared jungle" are blatant, as were Columbia's racial anxieties over losing control over a popular neighborhood meeting place for Black and Puerto Rican citizens.



Major shift here—we're going into the wild, wild 1960s. Popular historical imagination often associates the 1960s with student protesters who participated in anti-Vietnam War protests, the national Civil Rights Movement, and other radical protests. Particularly on college campuses, the political philosophy of **Black Power** took hold, as Black students and community activists used Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's definitions of **individual** and **institutional racism** to hold white supremacist systems accountable.

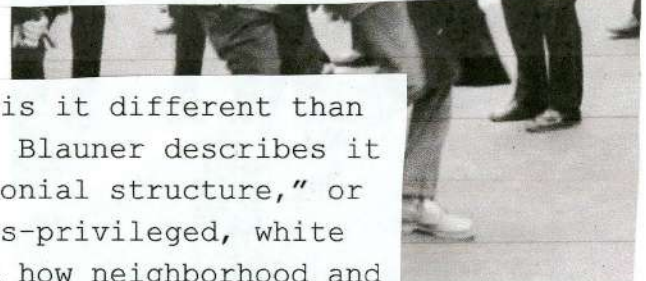
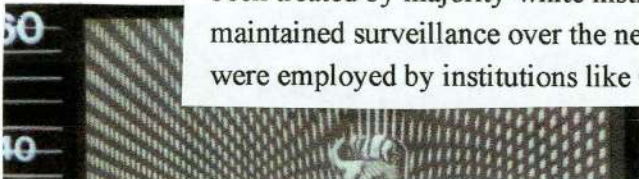
BLACK POWER



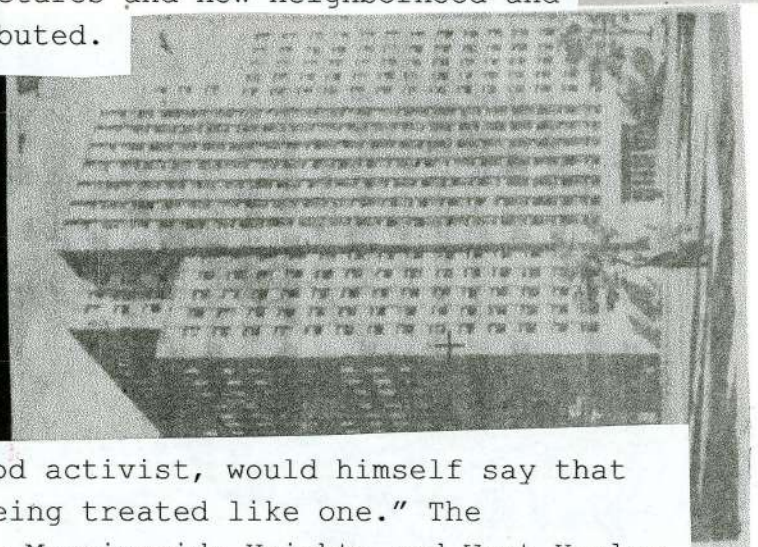
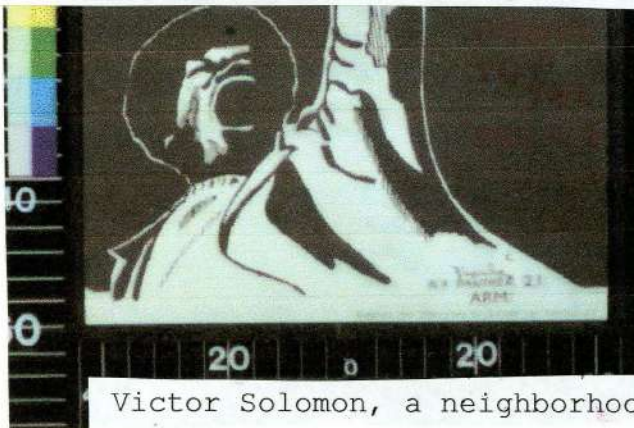
A particularly powerful quote from their 1967 manifesto *Black Power* reads, institutional racism is the system of social control that "keeps black people in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents."



That description resonated with the way residents of Morningside Heights and West Harlem had been treated by majority-white institutions like Columbia: as an **internal colony**. Police forces maintained surveillance over the neighborhood and served to protect white bodies and property, and were employed by institutions like Columbia to control communities of color.



Sidenote: what's an internal colony, and how is it different than good old evil colonialism? Sociologist Robert Blauner describes it as "Colonization outside of a traditional colonial structure," or a system where (white) institutions and (class-privileged, white elites) controlled urban power structures and how neighborhood and institutional resources were distributed.



Victor Solomon, a neighborhood activist, would himself say that "Harlem is a colony and is being treated like one." The experiences of communities in Morningside Heights and West Harlem resonated with psychological and economic abuse.

Master Plan On Evictions

BUT WHAT ABOUT
THE PARK?

Columbia continued to seize land in Morningside Heights throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the loss of urban public spaces sparked **intense** resentment among marginalized residents. An outraged constituent later wrote in a 1968 letter to the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, "Silence is acquiescence. And a silent Columbia community assumes full responsibility and possible penalty for this criminal and unfeeling rape of the public pride and the public property."

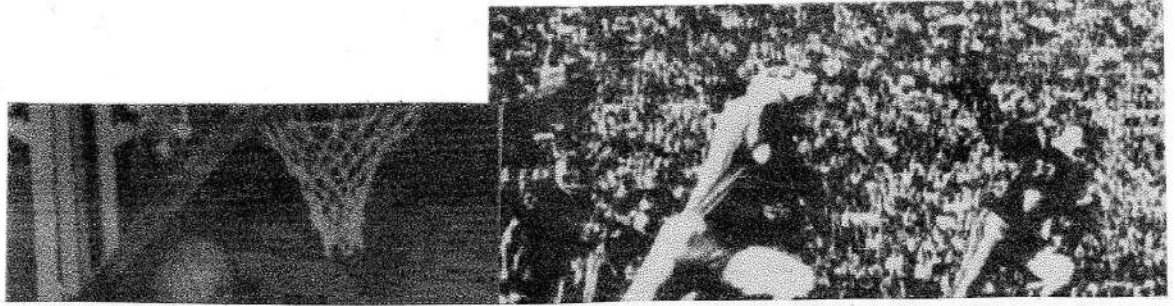
Here's how we get back to Morningside Park. I promised we'd get there! Columbia, resentful of the restrictions of being an Ivy League university hemmed in by the confines of the city, wanted to expand, and in particular, itched to expand their athletic facilities.

University President Grayson Kirk, affirming the so-called American, masculine potential of Columbia undergraduate men, believed that "young men want and need physical exercise, that it is a vital component of their physical and emotional well-being." Kirk first approached New York City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, to assess whether Columbia could purchase land in Morningside Park—public land, mind you—for a new university gymnasium in the late 1950s.

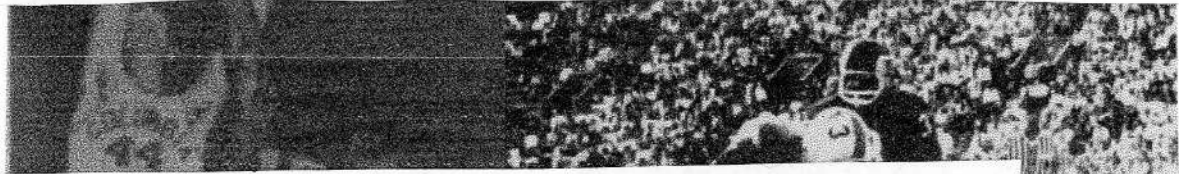
Fearful of lagging behind other colleges' state-of-the-art athletic facilities and losing young male recruits to better-equipped campuses, Columbia's trustees and administrators began formulating a plan of action to bring Columbia's athletic facilities into the 20th century. They'd long hoped of "cleaning up" Morningside Park, a space regarded by the University as "a buffer between the Negro community on the east and the white group on the west." Yes, these quotes are real.

TRANSITION: This is an aerial view of the Morningside Heights-Manhattanville projects in various stages of construction. View is north, with Grant's Tomb at far left.

Aerial photograph by MEYER LEROWITZ



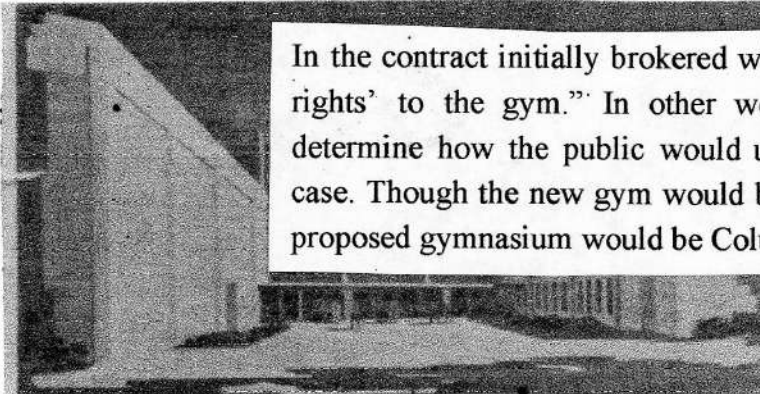
Moses rejected Kirk's proposal, countering with the suggestion that Columbia should either lease the land from the city or renovate its existing gymnasium. Reluctant to lose the opportunity to build facilities proximal to Columbia's campus, Kirk accepted Moses' counteroffer of a lease agreement with the City in 1960.



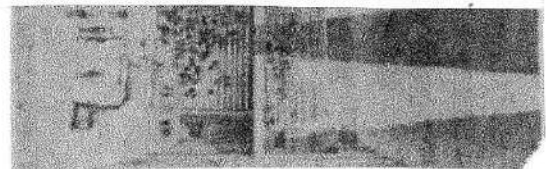
Their initial contract offered a 100-year lease for a \$3,000-a-year rental, and included city-mandated provisions that Columbia build a separate but smaller gymnasium for community athletic use. The New York City Board of Estimate officially approved Columbia's petition to lease 2.12 acres of Morningside Park for the gymnasium complex in 1961.



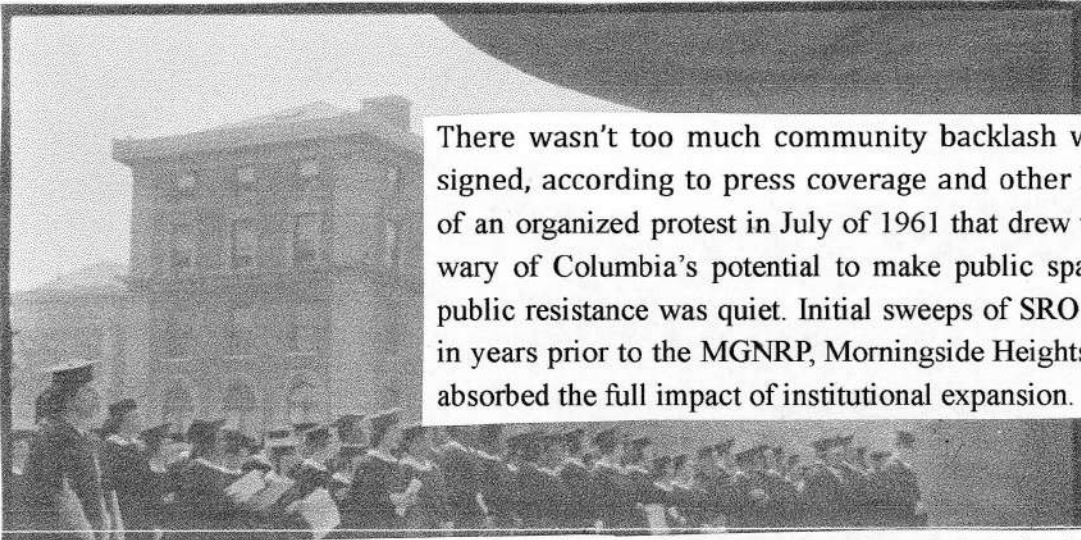
In the contract initially brokered with the city of New York, "the city had 'exclusive rights' to the gym." In other words, the city, not Columbia, was supposed to determine how the public would use the gymnasium. Except this wasn't really the case. Though the new gym would be a "Columbia-community" facility in theory, the proposed gymnasium would be Columbia's exclusive property in practice.



Part of the city's agreement with Columbia stipulated that Columbia would **privately finance** the gymnasium: through donors, partnerships, and grants. Columbia's development team went to work almost immediately after the lease was approved when fundraising for the gymnasium's initial \$6 million price tag. The promises they offered wealthy potential donors blatantly revealed Columbia's intent to turn public space (the park) into private space (the University's property).

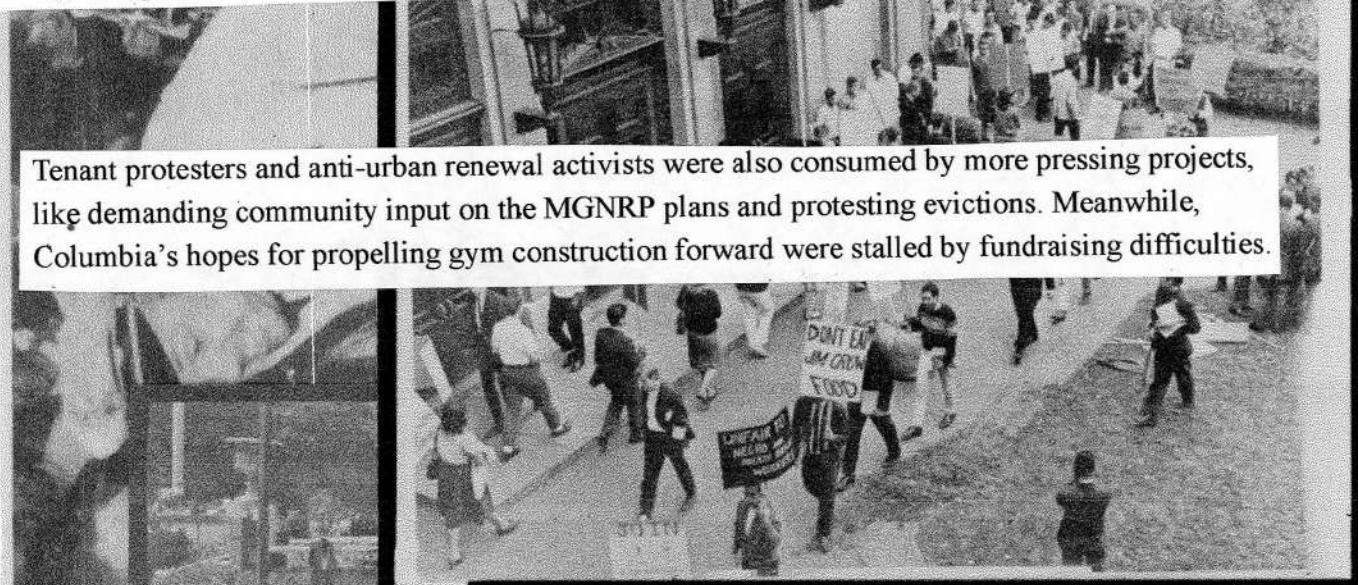


Columbia also fundraised with wealthy donors behind closed doors, pointing to a reality in which Columbia, as a public-private institution, had no obligation to the public to make their negotiation transparent. Columbia's sources of funding for the gymnasium project were designed to serve undergraduate students; **not** the community, despite empty promises to the city. Their donors and oversight placed the project beyond accountability to community constituents.

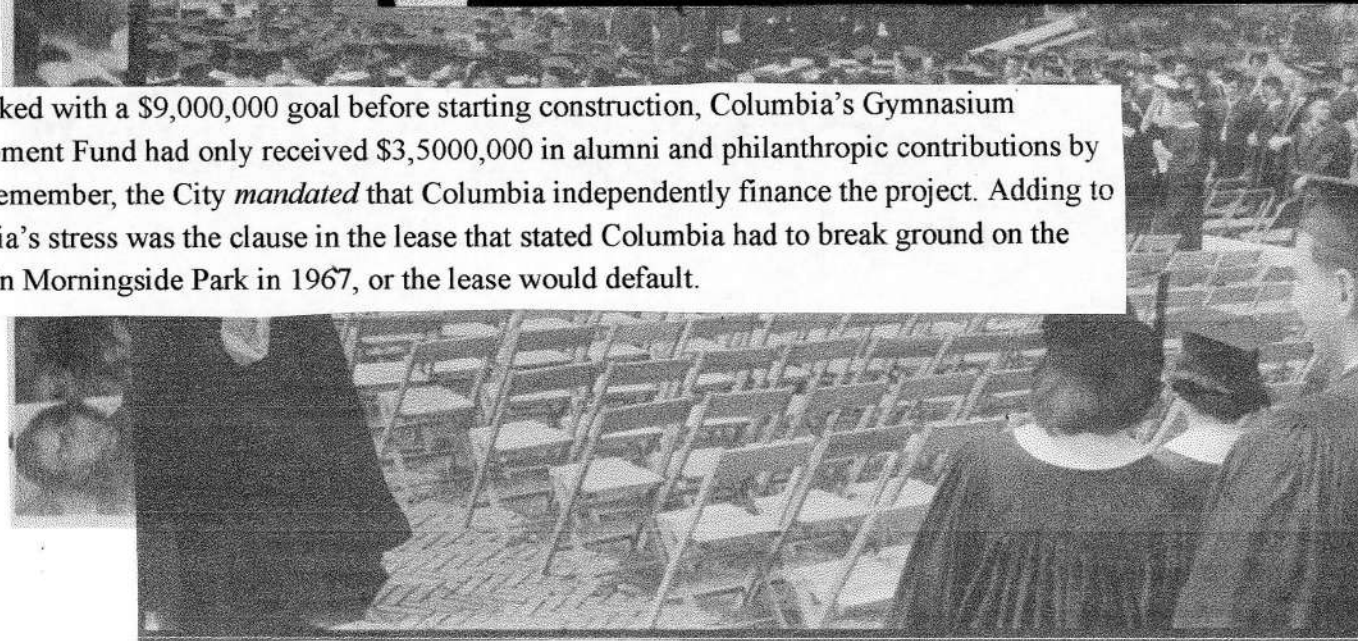


There wasn't too much community backlash when the lease was initially signed, according to press coverage and other historians' accounts. Outside of an organized protest in July of 1961 that drew together neighborhood groups wary of Columbia's potential to make public space in the park private, mass public resistance was quiet. Initial sweeps of SRO evictions had taken place, but in years prior to the MGNRP, Morningside Heights and West Harlem had not yet absorbed the full impact of institutional expansion.

Part of this ties back to a lack of public knowledge of just *how* complicit Columbia was in institutional expansion. Neighborhood papers like the *New York Amsterdam News* ran articles in support of the evicted, printing charges that "Columbia University is trying to oust them [Black residents] from the single room occupancy building 'to make Morningside Heights safe for Columbia,'" the pattern of evictions, expansion, and displacement was difficult to document.



Tenant protesters and anti-urban renewal activists were also consumed by more pressing projects, like demanding community input on the MGNRP plans and protesting evictions. Meanwhile, Columbia's hopes for propelling gym construction forward were stalled by fundraising difficulties.



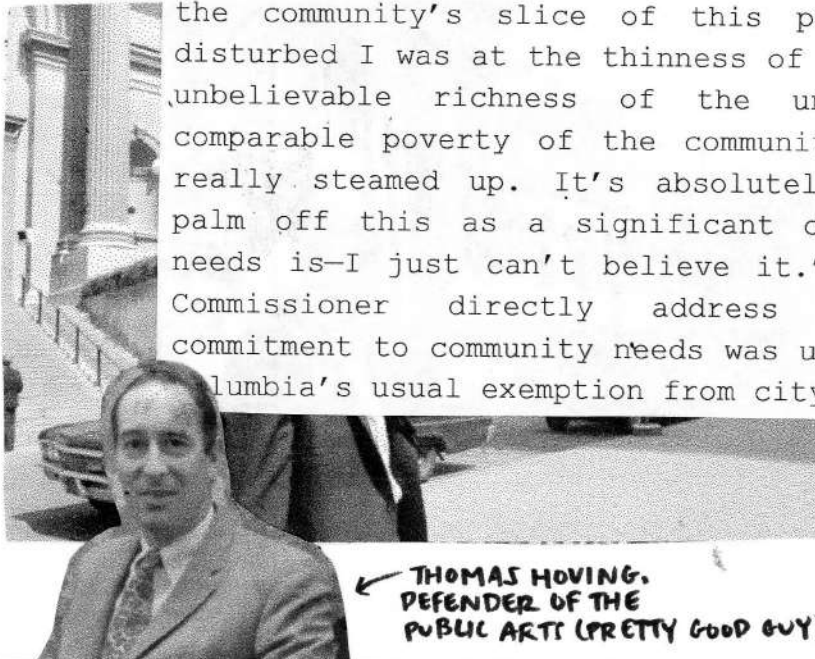
Now tasked with a \$9,000,000 goal before starting construction, Columbia's Gymnasium Development Fund had only received \$3,500,000 in alumni and philanthropic contributions by 1965. Remember, the City *mandated* that Columbia independently finance the project. Adding to Columbia's stress was the clause in the lease that stated Columbia had to break ground on the project in Morningside Park in 1967, or the lease would default.

When Mayor Robert F. Wagner ceded power to Mayor John V. Lindsay's administration in 1965, voters across all five boroughs were hungry for change. Lindsay's Ivy League pedigree, liberal and labor-backed support, and charismatic persona made him a welcome vessel for hopes of urban transformation.

Once in office, the Lindsay administration embraced urban renewal. His administration was notably friendlier to communities' right to offer input in the development process than Wagner, and also cultivated a keen interest in public art and green spaces, particularly the city's parks.

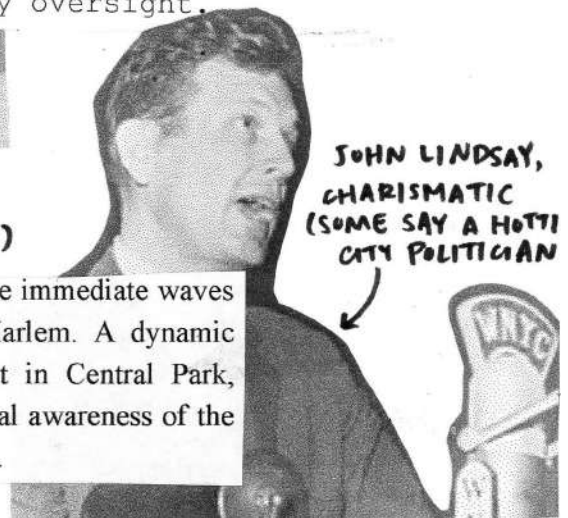
However, Lindsay firmly opposed Columbia's gymnasium plans. Against its construction on grounds of improper privatization of public land and its lack of sufficient community input, Lindsay's administration became a roadblock to Columbia's assumption that they could develop at will without the City's interference.

In a 1966 interview, Hoving remarked that: "The more I saw the community's slice of this particular pie, the more disturbed I was at the thinness of the slice. When I saw the unbelievable richness of the university part and the comparable poverty of the community part, I began to get really steamed up. It's absolutely ridiculous! To try to palm off this as a significant contribution to community needs is—I just can't believe it." To have the City Parks Commissioner directly address Columbia's superficial commitment to community needs was unprecedented, considering Columbia's usual exemption from city oversight.



← THOMAS HOVING,
DEFENDER OF THE
PUBLIC ARTS (PRETTY GOOD GUY)

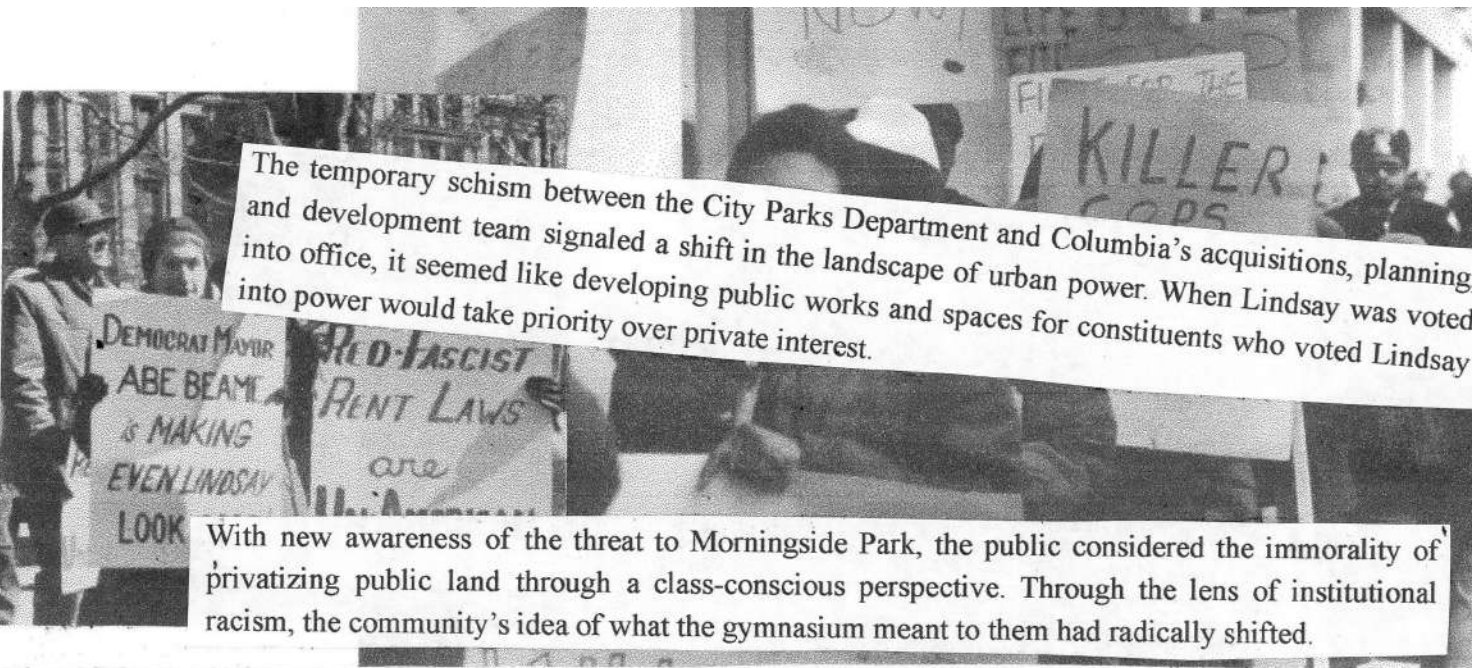
Commissioner Hoving's outspoken opposition to the gymnasium made immediate waves among community advocates in Morningside Heights and West Harlem. A dynamic advocate for public arts and defender against private development in Central Park, Hoving's commentary ensured that media coverage and public political awareness of the terms of Columbia's arrangement with the City of New York redoubled.



JOHN LINDSAY,
CHARISMATIC
(SOME SAY A HOT)
CITY POLITICIAN

No longer content to allow Columbia to deal with city and state officials with ease, Lindsay's and newly appointed Parks Commissioner Thomas Hoving's distaste for Columbia's real estate endeavors brought the implications of gym construction into the public eye.

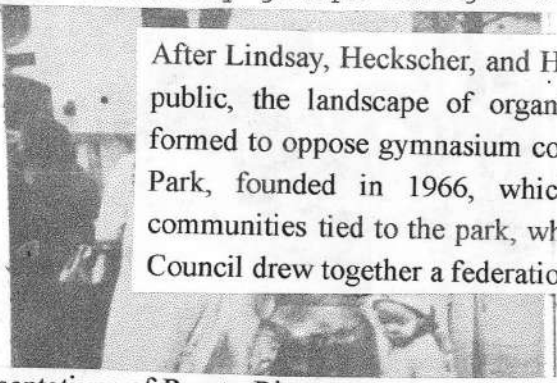
THIS IS BIG.
FOR THE FIRST TIME
SINCE THE EARLY
60S, THE GYM IS
REALLY BEING DEBATED BY THE PUBLIC.



The temporary schism between the City Parks Department and Columbia's acquisitions, planning and development team signaled a shift in the landscape of urban power. When Lindsay was voted into office, it seemed like developing public works and spaces for constituents who voted Lindsay into power would take priority over private interest.

With new awareness of the threat to Morningside Park, the public considered the immorality of privatizing public land through a class-conscious perspective. Through the lens of institutional racism, the community's idea of what the gymnasium meant to them had radically shifted.

By the time construction again became a viable possibility in 1966, student protesters and community activists were primed with new linguistic, theoretical, and tactical frameworks through which to approach their cause. Faced with the prospect of the gymnasium reaching the construction phase, organized community groups emerged and thrived.



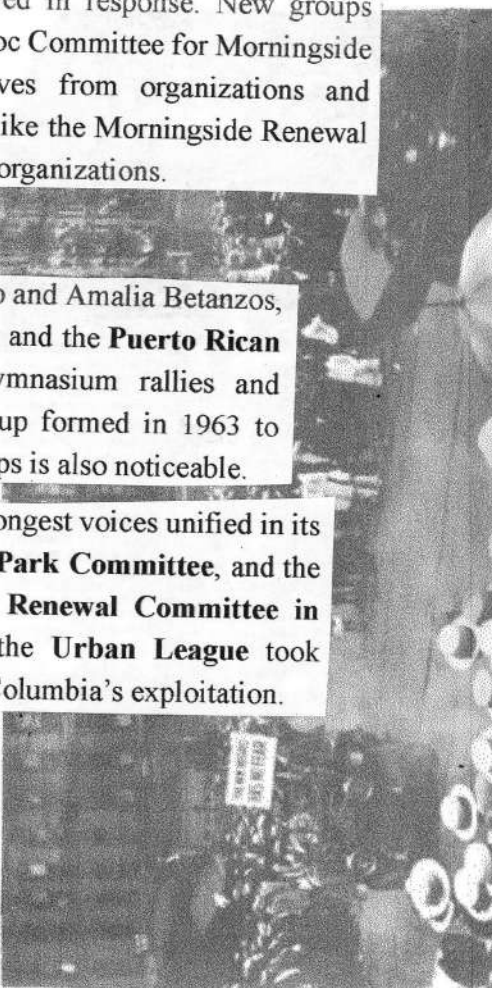
After Lindsay, Heckscher, and Hoving reintroduced the gymnasium issue to the broader public, the landscape of organized group power evolved in response. New groups formed to oppose gymnasium construction like the Ad Hoc Committee for Morningside Park, founded in 1966, which included representatives from organizations and communities tied to the park, while longstanding groups like the Morningside Renewal Council drew together a federation of existing community organizations.

Representatives of Puerto Rican tenant and housing groups like Eric Arroyo and Amalia Betanzos, the respective heads of the **Puerto Rican Citizens Committee on Housing** and the **Puerto Rican Community Development Project**, were frequent speakers at anti-gymnasium rallies and demonstrations. Within groups like **Morningsiders United**, a tenant group formed in 1963 to defend residential housing, organic overlap between groups' core memberships is also noticeable.

The **West Harlem Community Organization** emerged as one of the strongest voices unified in its opposition to the gymnasium, as did **Harlem CORE**, the **Morningside Park Committee**, and the **Citizens Care Committee**. Anti-poverty groups like the **Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH)**, **HARYOU-ACT**, and the New York chapter of the **Urban League** took anti-gymnasium stances as well, linking broader anti-poverty goals with Columbia's exploitation.

SHORT EXTRA READING LIST:

SUMMER IN THE CITY (2014), ed. Vitenitti
"THE COLUMBIA COALITION" (2008), Blake Stonecar
CIVIL RIGHTS IN NEW YORK CITY (2011), ed. Taylor

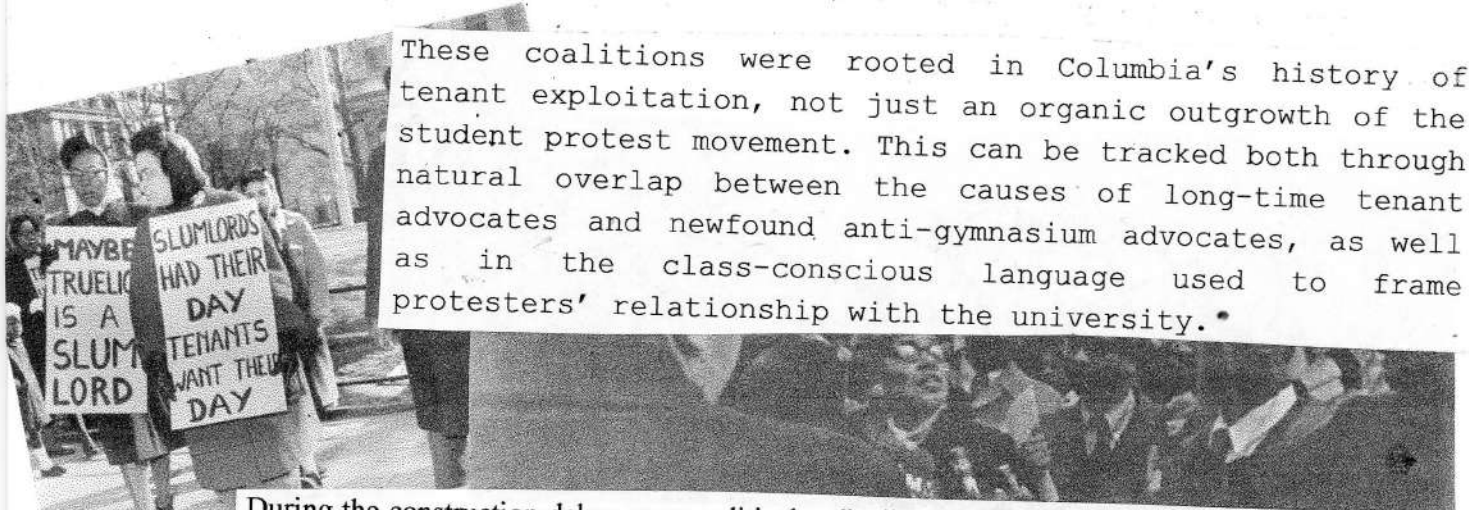


From that list of groups, you can see how community groups, anti-poverty groups, and tenant and housing groups gradually tailored public anti-gymnasium positions. The coalition politics that emerged in this moment were about coming together to defend the shared public space of Morningside Park, one of the last few remaining spaces that explicitly belonged to the community.

Each organization represented different group interests and articulated their relationship to the gymnasium with varying degrees of outrage. Despite core differences, the groups' readiness to organize with regards to double exploitation by race and class was striking.

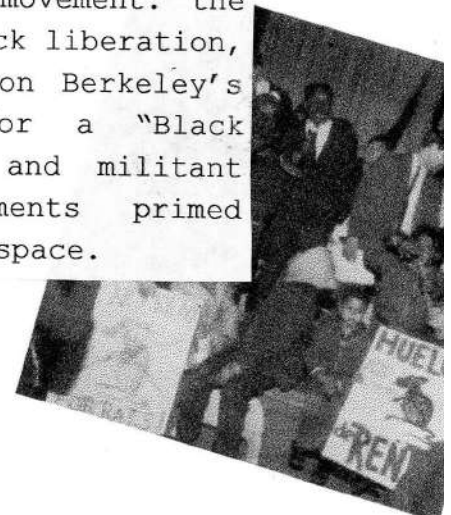
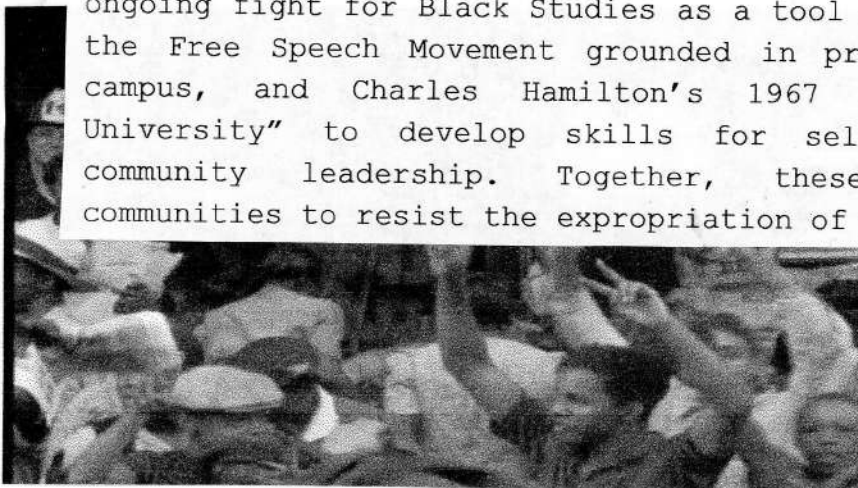
ALSO GENDER, WHICH
I DO NOT TALK ABOUT
ENOUGH

These coalitions were rooted in Columbia's history of tenant exploitation, not just an organic outgrowth of the student protest movement. This can be tracked both through natural overlap between the causes of long-time tenant advocates and newfound anti-gymnasium advocates, as well as in the class-conscious language used to frame protesters' relationship with the university.

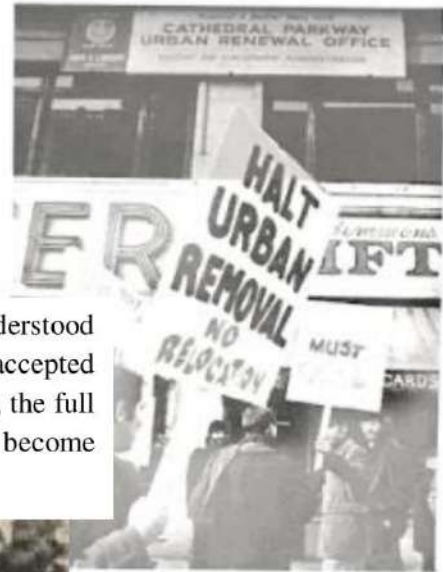


During the construction delay, mass political radicalization had also taken root. Harlem had hardly been apolitical before the mid-1960s, and thrived under the political legacy of Ella Baker's coalition-building work in Harlem in the 1950s. But the national Civil Rights movement, from student participation in the Freedom Rides to the schools of influence surrounding Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, inspired communities of color around Columbia's campus to put their conditions into a new political context. Police forces' commitment to regulating Black bodies and protecting white capital also spurred race riots across the country, including in Harlem in 1964.

Neighborhood ideological change came at the same time as major developments in the nationwide student protest movement: the ongoing fight for Black Studies as a tool for Black liberation, the Free Speech Movement grounded in protests on Berkeley's campus, and Charles Hamilton's 1967 call for a "Black University" to develop skills for self-help and militant community leadership. Together, these movements primed communities to resist the expropriation of public space.



Like their deliberate refusal to acknowledge tenant protests years before, Columbia dismissed the gathering coalition groups as opportunistic or ignorant of what their cause meant. By refusing to engage in these community conversations, Columbia revealed their unwillingness to expand the confines of who governed within the "public."



Yet by 1967, the community response was different. They understood that 1) constructing a private gym on public land would violate accepted norms of urban public space to a new extreme, and 2) by now, the full extent of tenant evictions and Columbia's involvement had become common knowledge.

Plans for the gym, for years, had been negotiated behind closed doors. SDS propaganda would later characterize it as an "eight-year-long path of high-level, closed door political maneuvering by Columbia administrators to get the city to give it two acres of public park land at the token rent of \$3000 per year."

In the process of negotiating the gym project, Morningside Heights and Harlem residents had been rendered **functionless** within decision-making processes. Yet again, Columbia "experts" claimed they were knowledgeable about community needs than the impacted communities themselves. Assembling into a system of fragmented, but organized, protest coalitions represented a tangible step toward reclaiming public spaces for the people.

As the debate over what the gymnasium access and resources for the community would like for the community raged on, concessions were negotiated and renegotiated. Attempting to smooth the matter over, Columbia offered Morningside Heights and Harlem residents the use of a swimming pool inside the gymnasium facilities in 1967.

The addition of the pool increased the percentage allotted for community usage "from 11 percent to 16 percent." According to a new Board of Estimate-approved lease of 1967, the final agreement would provide separate gymnasiums and pools for both campus and community, **although community spaces would be substantially smaller**. A Columbia spokesman said the lease changes were "to the neighborhood's benefit, 'although not legally obligated to do so."

When Neighborhood Board 3, representing West Harlem's interests, opposed moving forward the long-delayed construction timeline, President Kirk threatened to backtrack on Columbia's offer to install a community swimming pool. Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton (recipient of Kirk's threats) and state Senator Basil Paterson, two well-known Harlem black moderates, would emerge as two of the gymnasium's most prominent political opponents.



Although both Sutton and Bronx Borough President Herman Badillo initially pushed to change the lease terms, rather than to terminate the gym project itself, their positions shifted as their constituents vocally protested. While community members valued their representatives gaining bargaining power, they resented that "the Columbia-community sessions have so far been cloaked in secrecy," as a lack of transparency prevented residents from exercising power.



When terms were made public, the idea that allotted community space would be a separate gymnasium and swimming pool within the same multi-floor facility prompted rightful cries of separate but unequal. Jim Crow segregation did not explicitly exist in the North, but Senator Paterson called the plans as the community saw them: as "separate swimming pools with separate entrances for Columbia students and community youngsters in the 'classic pattern of Southern segregation.'" Budding recognition of the dimensions of race and power embedded in the use terms of the gym, built upon community public space, fueled the rallying cry "Gym Crow Must Go."

GYM-CROW

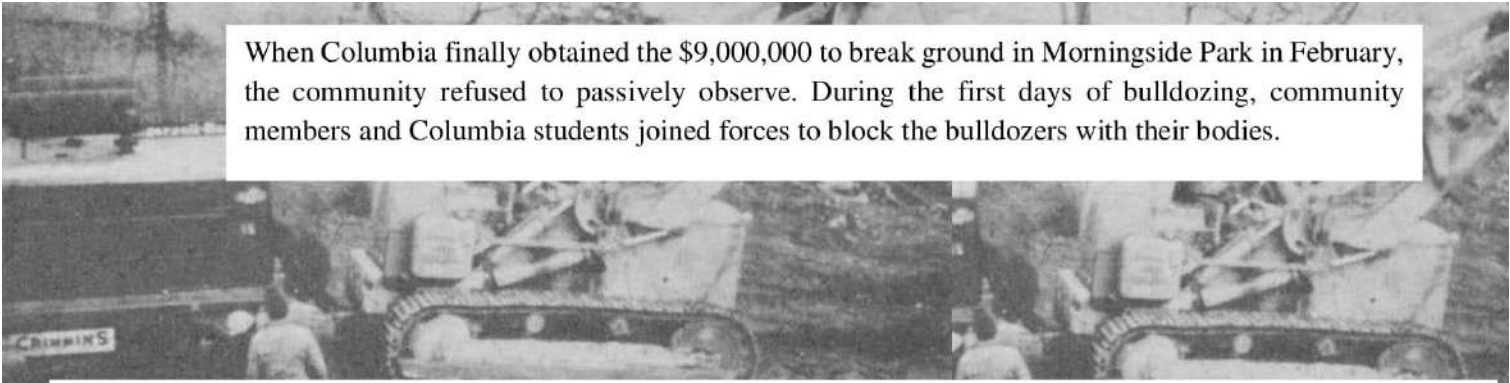
IN
MORNINGSIDE PARK



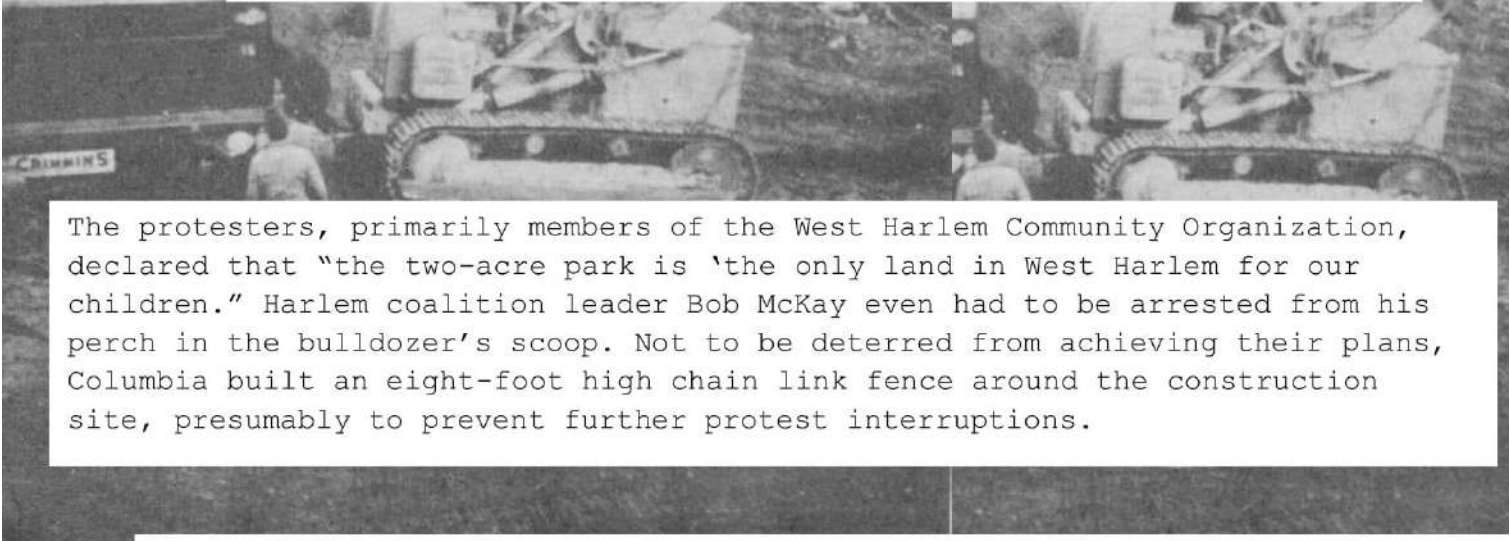
Mayor Lindsay continued to express opposition to the project throughout 1967, initially appearing to side with community groups in pressing for more space for shared community facilities. As Senator Paterson noted in 1967, "'Can you imagine what would happen on a hot August night when the community gym is overcrowded and the community people know there is a swimming pool upstairs but that their kids can't use it, only the Columbia students can? Can you imagine what that would cause?'" Lindsay could imagine all too vividly what it would cause.



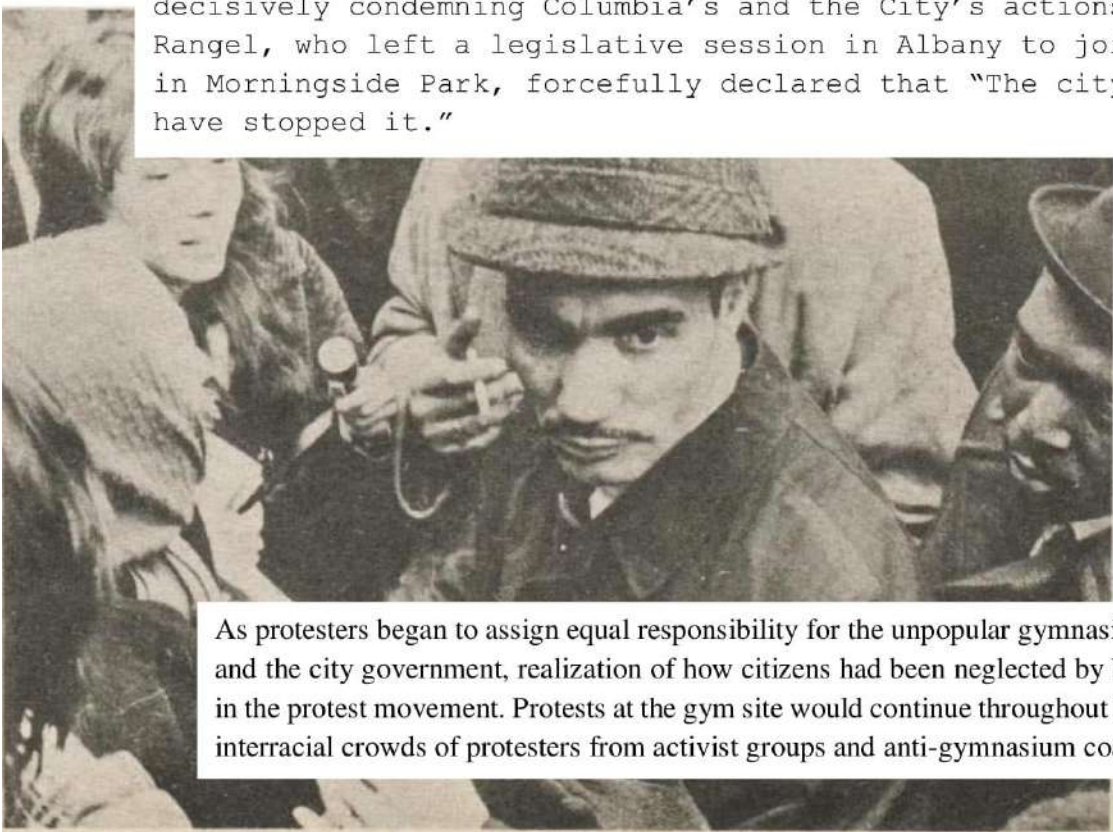
Steering clear of appearing to work against community interests (and in his eyes, avoiding setting a spark under a powder keg in Harlem) Lindsay pushed Columbia to expand the provisions in the lease. Yet by the end of 1967, President Kirk and the Columbia development team's relationship with the City regained stable footing. As Lindsay's staff noted, though terms brokered under Wagner's administration did not contain adequate community provisions, the renegotiated deal, filled with promises like the community pool, would suffice.



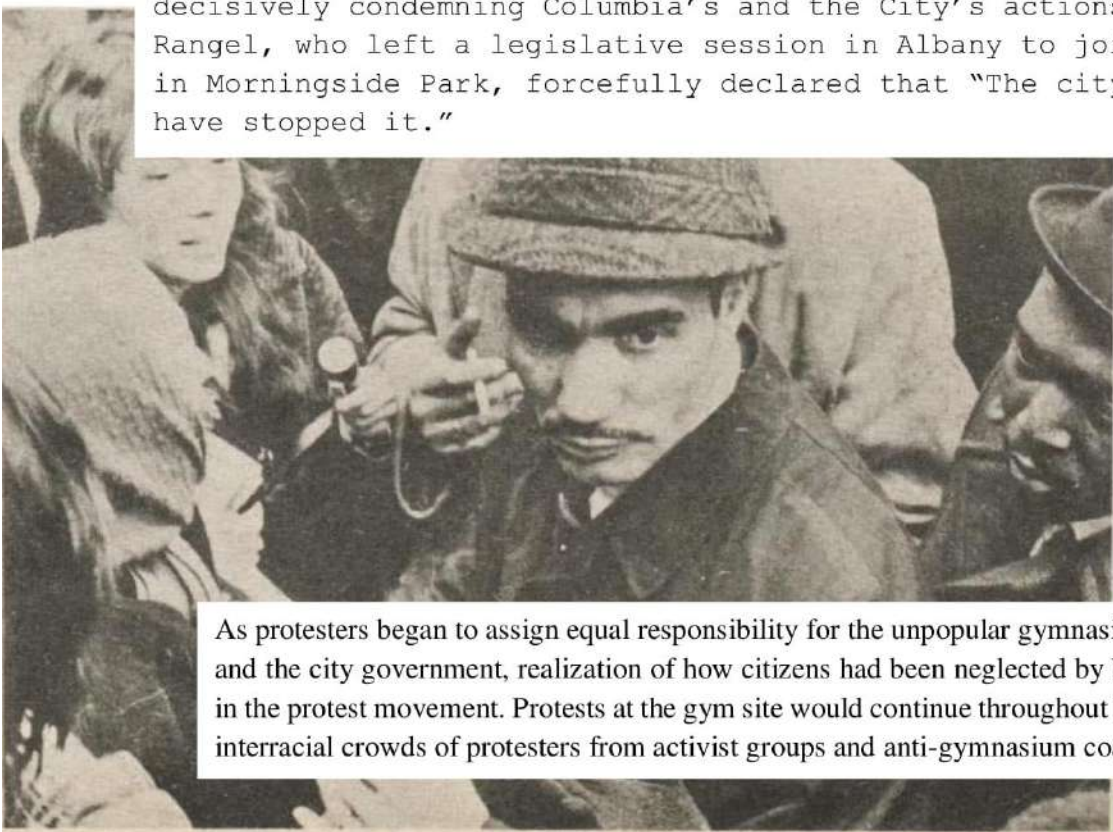
When Columbia finally obtained the \$9,000,000 to break ground in Morningside Park in February, the community refused to passively observe. During the first days of bulldozing, community members and Columbia students joined forces to block the bulldozers with their bodies.



The protesters, primarily members of the West Harlem Community Organization, declared that "the two-acre park is 'the only land in West Harlem for our children.'" Harlem coalition leader Bob McKay even had to be arrested from his perch in the bulldozer's scoop. Not to be deterred from achieving their plans, Columbia built an eight-foot high chain link fence around the construction site, presumably to prevent further protest interruptions.



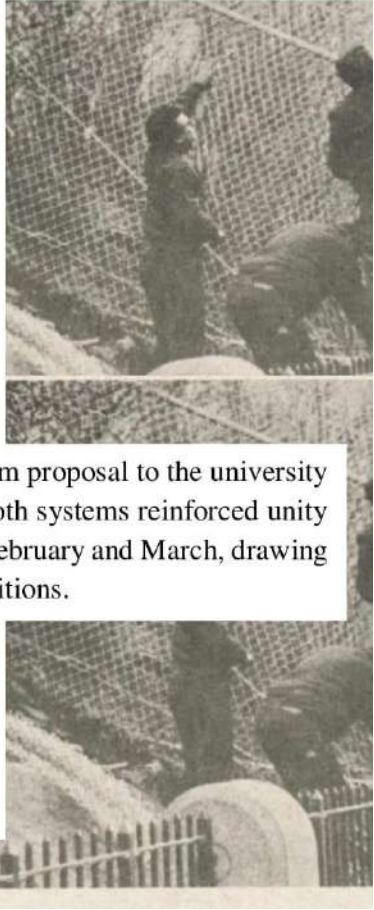
Though the protest in early February was the first to garner wider publicity, neighborhood tensions were slowly brewing to a climax. Not only were community activists willing to put their bodies on the line to stop construction from progressing, but high-profile political leaders were decisively condemning Columbia's and the City's actions. Paterson and Rangel, who left a legislative session in Albany to join their constituents in Morningside Park, forcefully declared that "The city at all times could have stopped it."

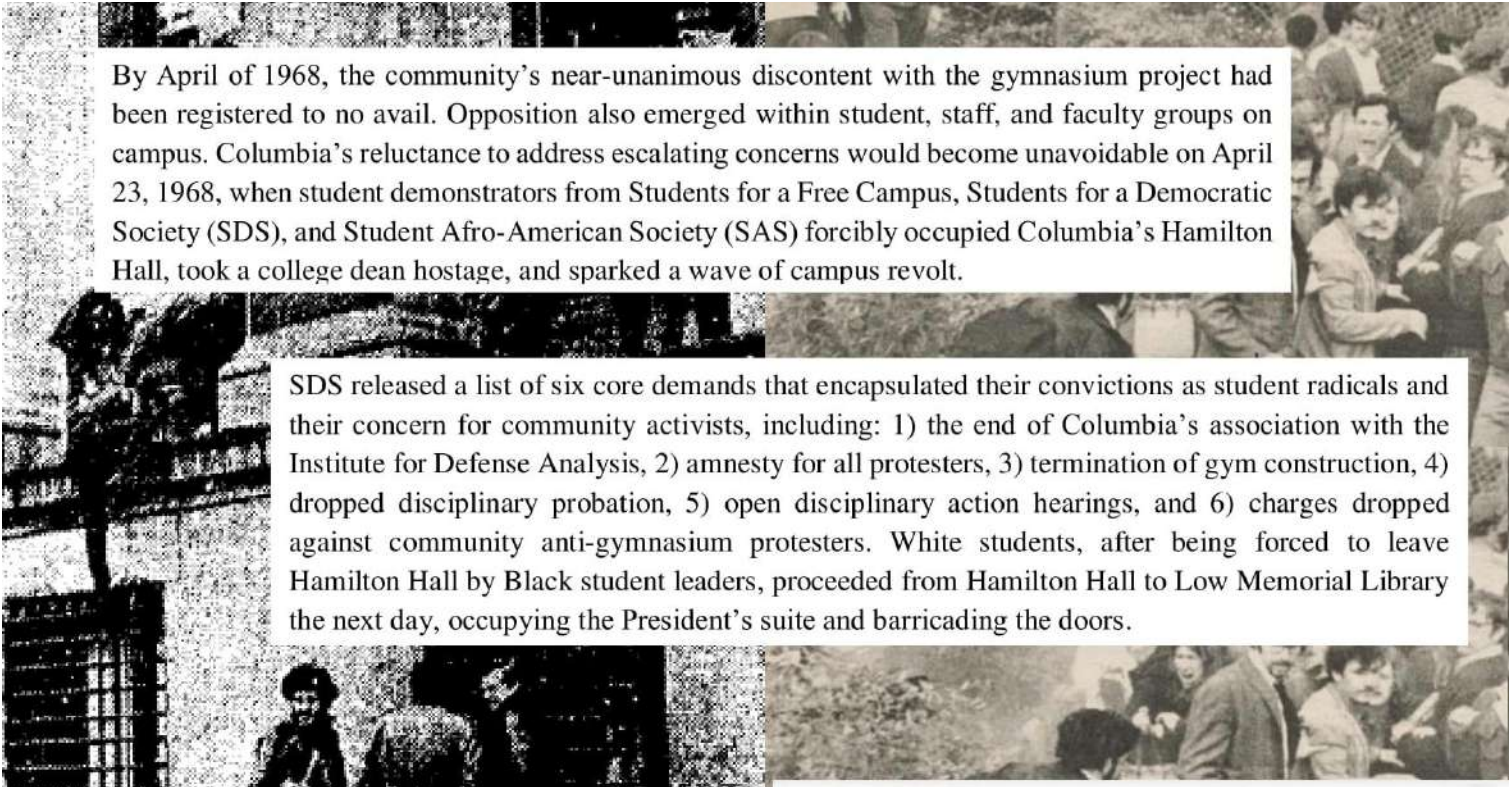


As protesters began to assign equal responsibility for the unpopular gymnasium proposal to the university and the city government, realization of how citizens had been neglected by both systems reinforced unity in the protest movement. Protests at the gym site would continue throughout February and March, drawing interracial crowds of protesters from activist groups and anti-gymnasium coalitions.

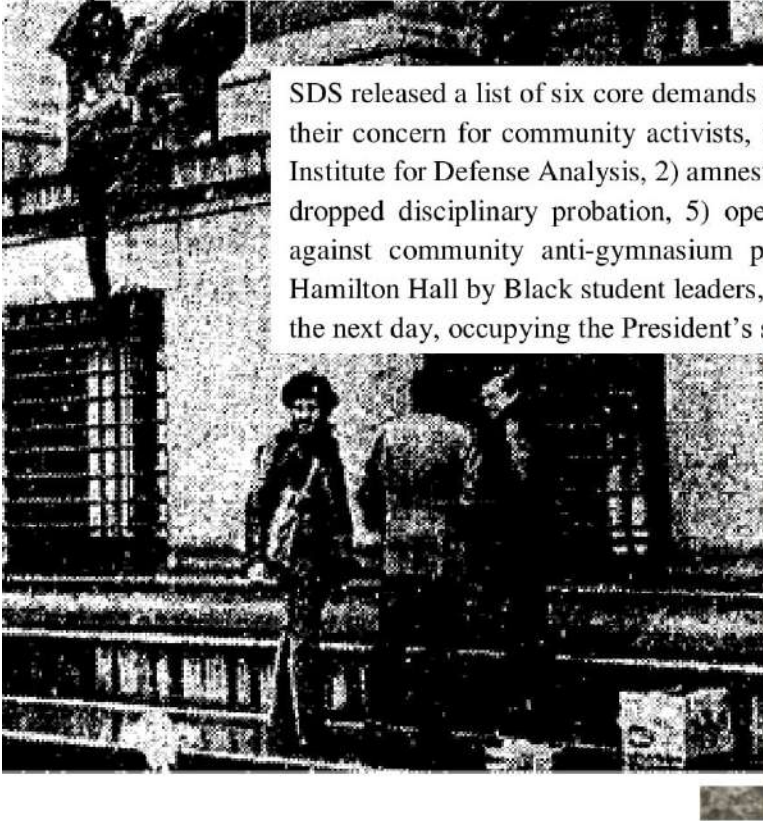
Photo by David Finck

LOCAL POLITICS: State Senator Basil Paterson (center) and State Assemblyman Charles B. Rangel (partially hidden) were among the picketers in front of Ferris Booth Wednesday. Both men called for an end to gym construction.






By April of 1968, the community's near-unanimous discontent with the gymnasium project had been registered to no avail. Opposition also emerged within student, staff, and faculty groups on campus. Columbia's reluctance to address escalating concerns would become unavoidable on April 23, 1968, when student demonstrators from Students for a Free Campus, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Student Afro-American Society (SAS) forcibly occupied Columbia's Hamilton Hall, took a college dean hostage, and sparked a wave of campus revolt.




SDS released a list of six core demands that encapsulated their convictions as student radicals and their concern for community activists, including: 1) the end of Columbia's association with the Institute for Defense Analysis, 2) amnesty for all protesters, 3) termination of gym construction, 4) dropped disciplinary probation, 5) open disciplinary action hearings, and 6) charges dropped against community anti-gymnasium protesters. White students, after being forced to leave Hamilton Hall by Black student leaders, proceeded from Hamilton Hall to Low Memorial Library the next day, occupying the President's suite and barricading the doors.



Community committee to support columbia students -
**SUPPORT COLUMBIA
STUDENTS**
Condemn Lindsay's police force

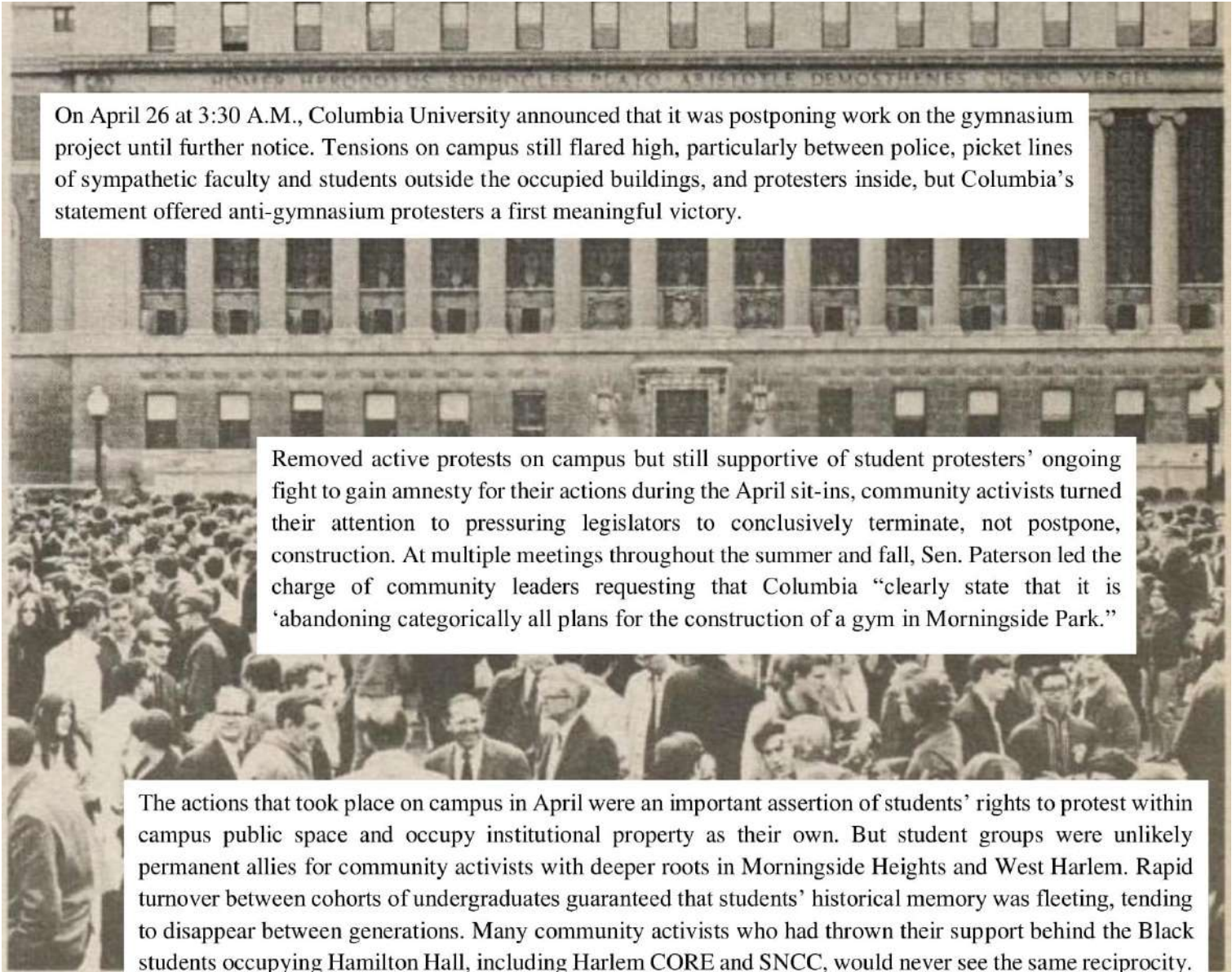
President Kirk met with Sutton, Paterson, Rangel, and officers from Mayor Lindsay's office on April 24th, discussing both potential disciplinary and criminal consequences for student trespassers and the possibilities for addressing the gymnasium issue to all parties' satisfaction. Police meetings took place the same day, as Kirk and the Columbia administration grimly weighed the potential consequences of using police force to remove student "trespassers" from campus property. Meanwhile, students continued to occupy campus buildings, as groups took Fayerweather Hall on April 25th, followed by the Mathematics building on April 26th.



According to a press release sent out from occupants of Hamilton Hall, students would not consider negotiating with the university until protesters were definitively granted amnesty and the gymnasium construction was halted. The report also details the provisions to maintain students' siege of the building: an infirmary, cafeteria with non-perishable provisions, sanitation teams, and other markers of Black student control. Students, and the community members that their occupation in part represented, were not willing to cede the bargaining power they had briefly acquired over the university without a fight.



COLUMBIA




On April 26 at 3:30 A.M., Columbia University announced that it was postponing work on the gymnasium project until further notice. Tensions on campus still flared high, particularly between police, picket lines of sympathetic faculty and students outside the occupied buildings, and protesters inside, but Columbia's statement offered anti-gymnasium protesters a first meaningful victory.

Removed active protests on campus but still supportive of student protesters' ongoing fight to gain amnesty for their actions during the April sit-ins, community activists turned their attention to pressuring legislators to conclusively terminate, not postpone, construction. At multiple meetings throughout the summer and fall, Sen. Paterson led the charge of community leaders requesting that Columbia "clearly state that it is 'abandoning categorically all plans for the construction of a gym in Morningside Park.'"

The actions that took place on campus in April were an important assertion of students' rights to protest within campus public space and occupy institutional property as their own. But student groups were unlikely permanent allies for community activists with deeper roots in Morningside Heights and West Harlem. Rapid turnover between cohorts of undergraduates guaranteed that students' historical memory was fleeting, tending to disappear between generations. Many community activists who had thrown their support behind the Black students occupying Hamilton Hall, including Harlem CORE and SNCC, would never see the same reciprocity.

OR
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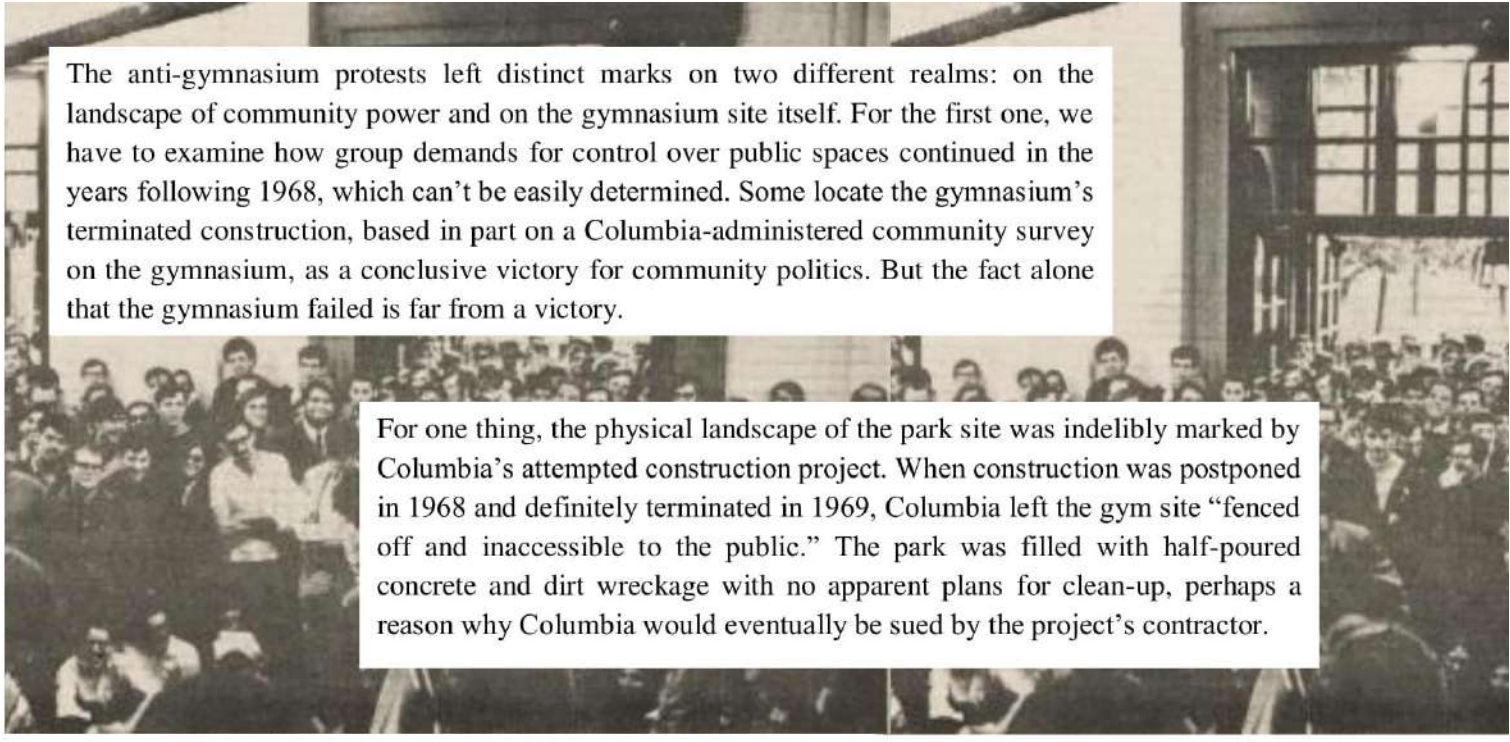
THE PEOPLE
WILL RUN
COLUMBIA



However, SAS, the Afro-American student group, did understand with more urgency the implications of Columbia's disregard for Black community input on the gymnasium project. One of their key goals was stated as forcing "to give the community greater voice in controlling the gym, much greater access to the gym's facilities, and many more concessions." Though SAS' membership, too, would fade away with the natural ebb and flow of students through Columbia's gates, the temporary coalition they formed with SDS and Black community protesters from Harlem and Morningside Heights was a genuine confluence of interests.



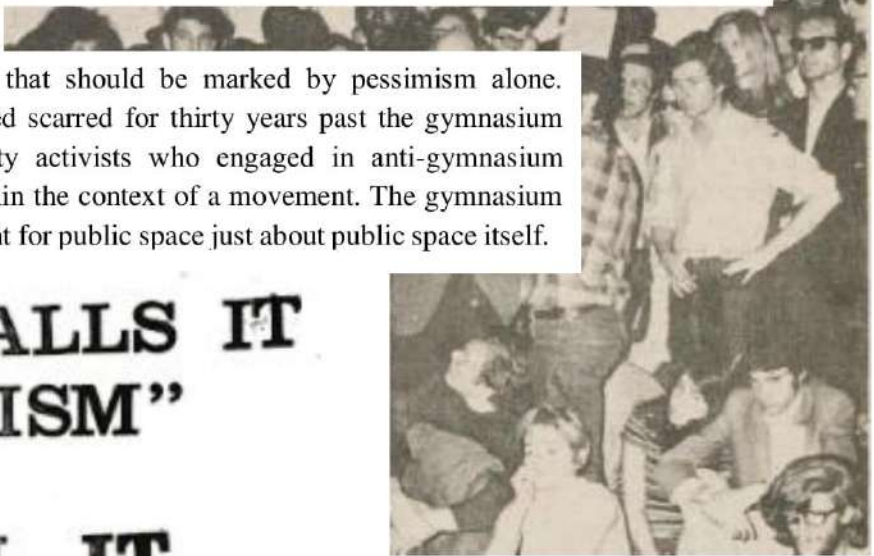
TRUTH
we are the
people



The anti-gymnasium protests left distinct marks on two different realms: on the landscape of community power and on the gymnasium site itself. For the first one, we have to examine how group demands for control over public spaces continued in the years following 1968, which can't be easily determined. Some locate the gymnasium's terminated construction, based in part on a Columbia-administered community survey on the gymnasium, as a conclusive victory for community politics. But the fact alone that the gymnasium failed is far from a victory.

For one thing, the physical landscape of the park site was indelibly marked by Columbia's attempted construction project. When construction was postponed in 1968 and definitely terminated in 1969, Columbia left the gym site "fenced off and inaccessible to the public." The park was filled with half-poured concrete and dirt wreckage with no apparent plans for clean-up, perhaps a reason why Columbia would eventually be sued by the project's contractor.

For another, Columbia didn't make the decision to terminate gymnasium construction based upon community input, which was supposed to be assessed through a proposed survey that would offer a voice in the verdict on the gymnasium's fate. In reality, a closed-door meeting between former Urban Center director Franklin H. Williams and acting Columbia President Andrew Cordier concretized Cordier's final decision to tell the Board of Trustees to permanently drop the Morningside Park gymnasium proposal.



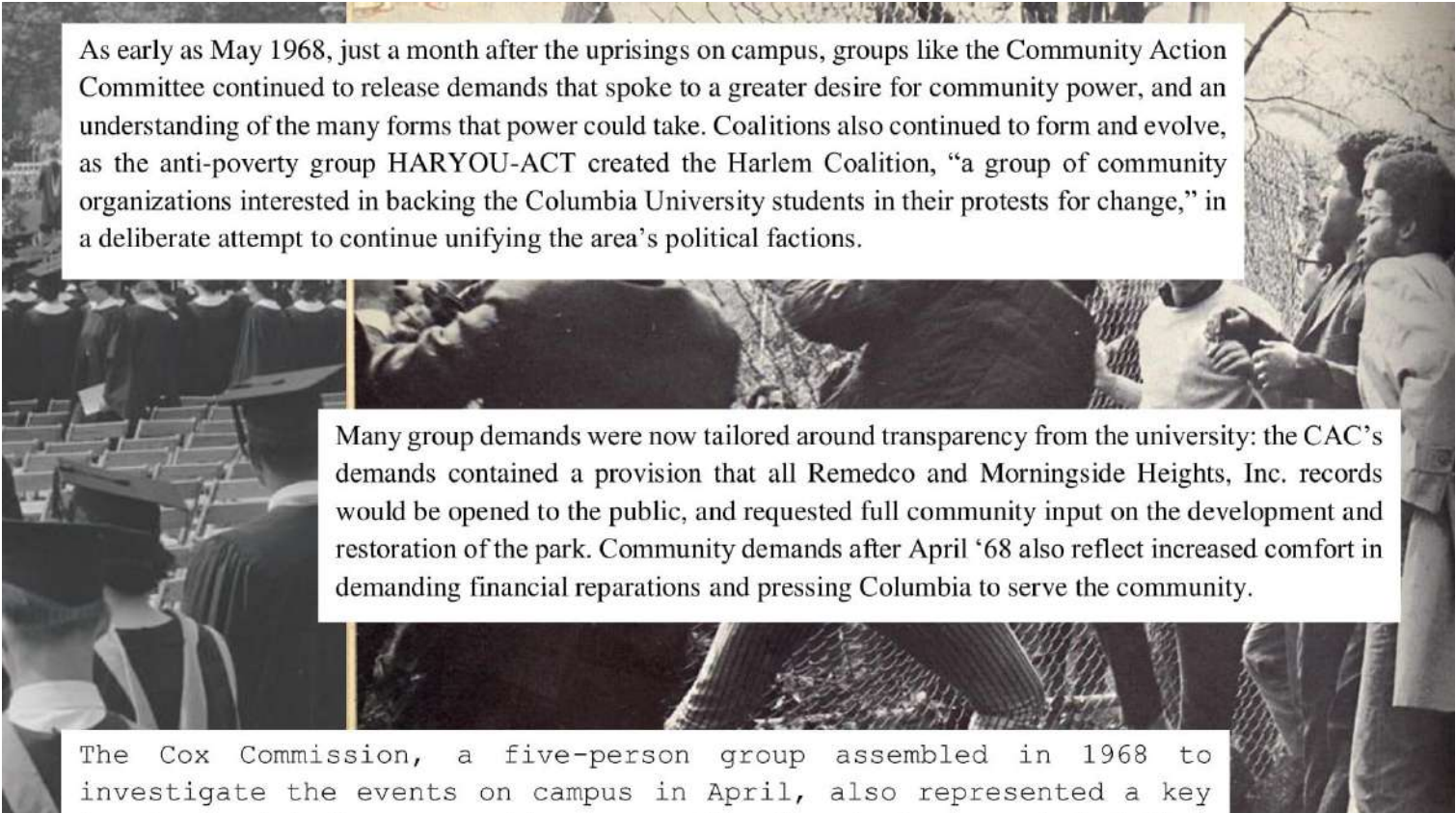
Regardless, this narrative isn't one that should be marked by pessimism alone. Morningside Park may have remained scarred for thirty years past the gymnasium project's termination, but community activists who engaged in anti-gymnasium protests learned valuable lessons within the context of a movement. The gymnasium wasn't just a building, nor was the fight for public space just about public space itself.

**THE TIMES CALLS IT
"HOODLUMISM"**

**WE CALL IT
INEVITABLE**

More than symbolism, the gymnasium struggle helped air political-economic grievances in the neighborhood and brought mass attention to Columbia's abuses of power. The gymnasium crisis was a moment in history that spanned beyond Morningside Park: it helps us understand how dynamics of urban political economy played out across the 20th century and now sprawl into New York's contemporary urban landscape.

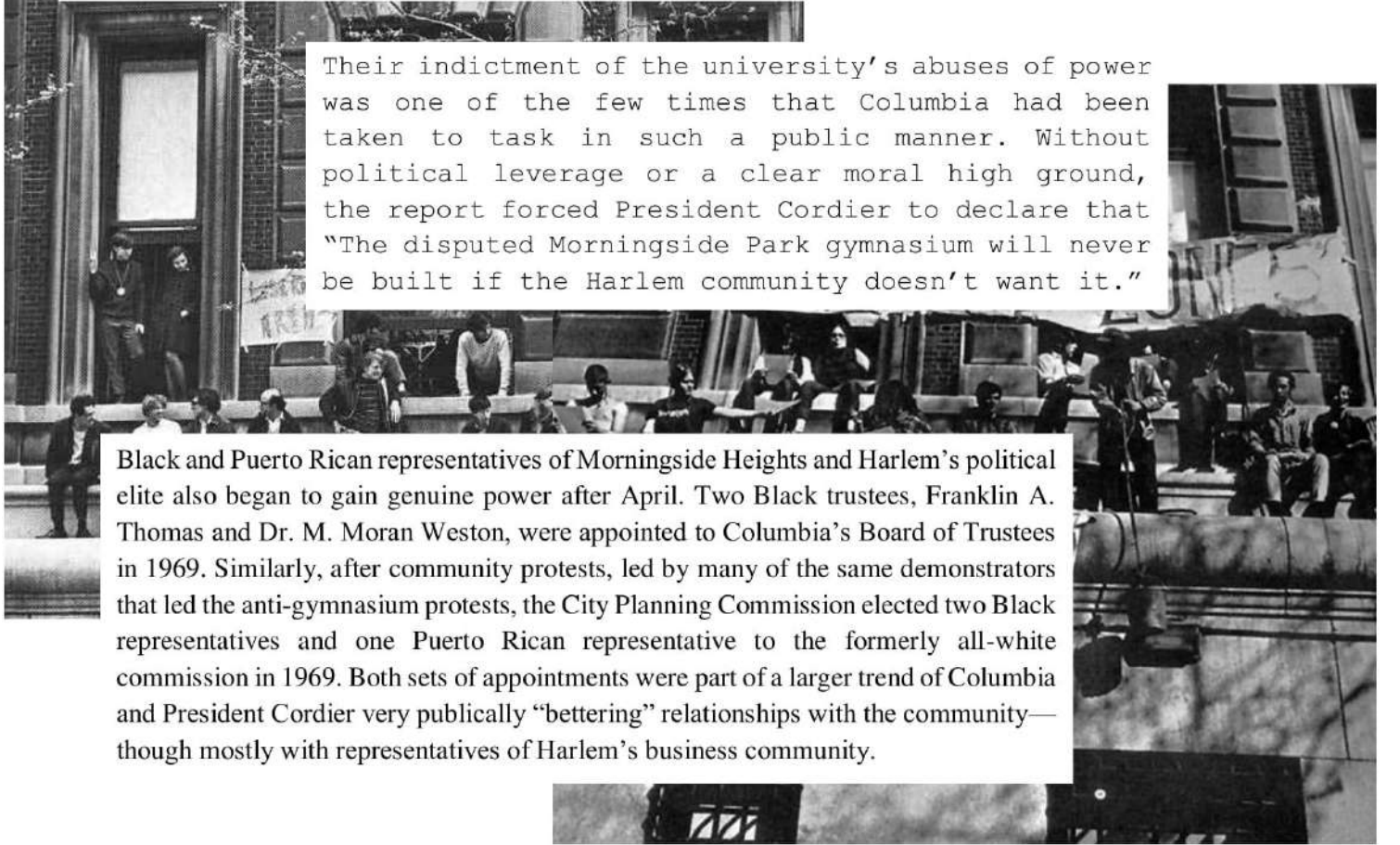
THE MIR
NOW EXP
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As early as May 1968, just a month after the uprisings on campus, groups like the Community Action Committee continued to release demands that spoke to a greater desire for community power, and an understanding of the many forms that power could take. Coalitions also continued to form and evolve, as the anti-poverty group HARYOU-ACT created the Harlem Coalition, “a group of community organizations interested in backing the Columbia University students in their protests for change,” in a deliberate attempt to continue unifying the area’s political factions.

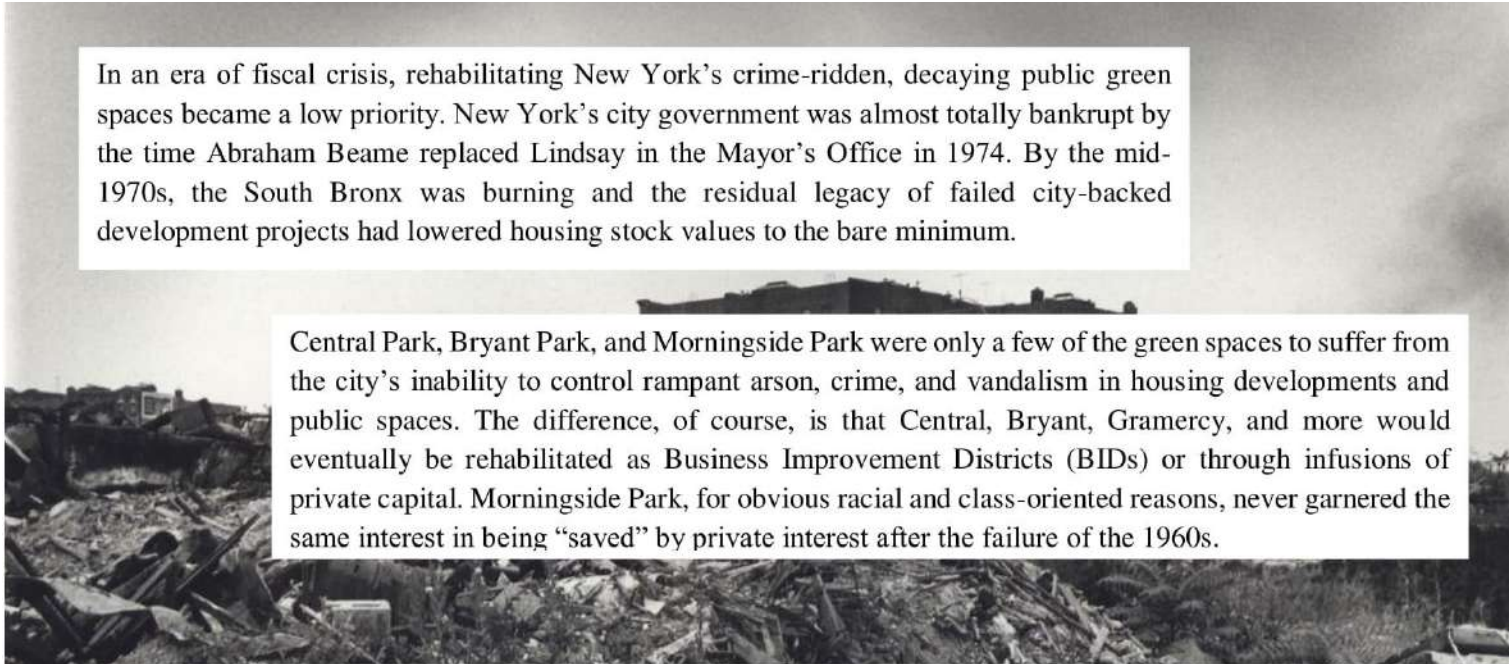
Many group demands were now tailored around transparency from the university: the CAC’s demands contained a provision that all Remedco and Morningside Heights, Inc. records would be opened to the public, and requested full community input on the development and restoration of the park. Community demands after April ‘68 also reflect increased comfort in demanding financial reparations and pressing Columbia to serve the community.

The Cox Commission, a five-person group assembled in 1968 to investigate the events on campus in April, also represented a key turning point for community power. The Commission concluded that the “record before us is filled with the strongest criticism of Columbia’s conduct in relation to its non-institutional neighbors both in Harlem and on Morningside Heights.”



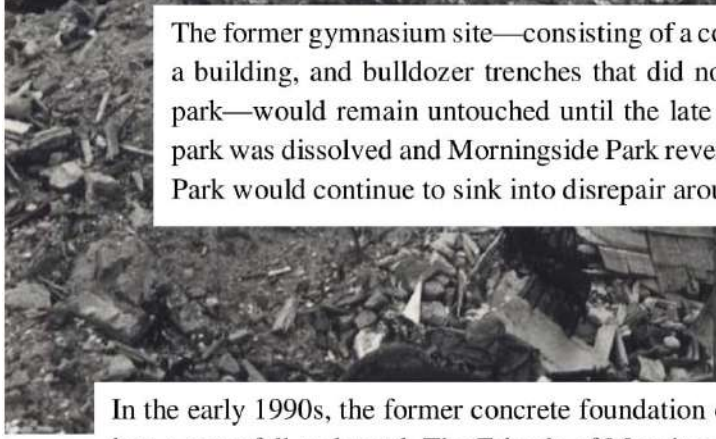
Their indictment of the university’s abuses of power was one of the few times that Columbia had been taken to task in such a public manner. Without political leverage or a clear moral high ground, the report forced President Cordier to declare that “The disputed Morningside Park gymnasium will never be built if the Harlem community doesn’t want it.”

Black and Puerto Rican representatives of Morningside Heights and Harlem’s political elite also began to gain genuine power after April. Two Black trustees, Franklin A. Thomas and Dr. M. Moran Weston, were appointed to Columbia’s Board of Trustees in 1969. Similarly, after community protests, led by many of the same demonstrators that led the anti-gymnasium protests, the City Planning Commission elected two Black representatives and one Puerto Rican representative to the formerly all-white commission in 1969. Both sets of appointments were part of a larger trend of Columbia and President Cordier very publically “bettering” relationships with the community—though mostly with representatives of Harlem’s business community.

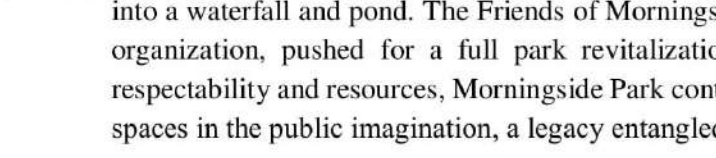


In an era of fiscal crisis, rehabilitating New York's crime-ridden, decaying public green spaces became a low priority. New York's city government was almost totally bankrupt by the time Abraham Beame replaced Lindsay in the Mayor's Office in 1974. By the mid-1970s, the South Bronx was burning and the residual legacy of failed city-backed development projects had lowered housing stock values to the bare minimum.

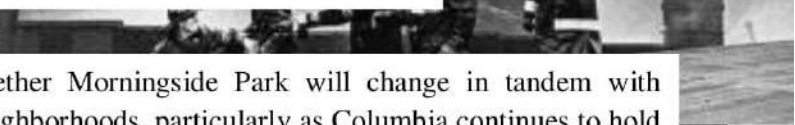
Central Park, Bryant Park, and Morningside Park were only a few of the green spaces to suffer from the city's inability to control rampant arson, crime, and vandalism in housing developments and public spaces. The difference, of course, is that Central, Bryant, Gramercy, and more would eventually be rehabilitated as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) or through infusions of private capital. Morningside Park, for obvious racial and class-oriented reasons, never garnered the same interest in being "saved" by private interest after the failure of the 1960s.



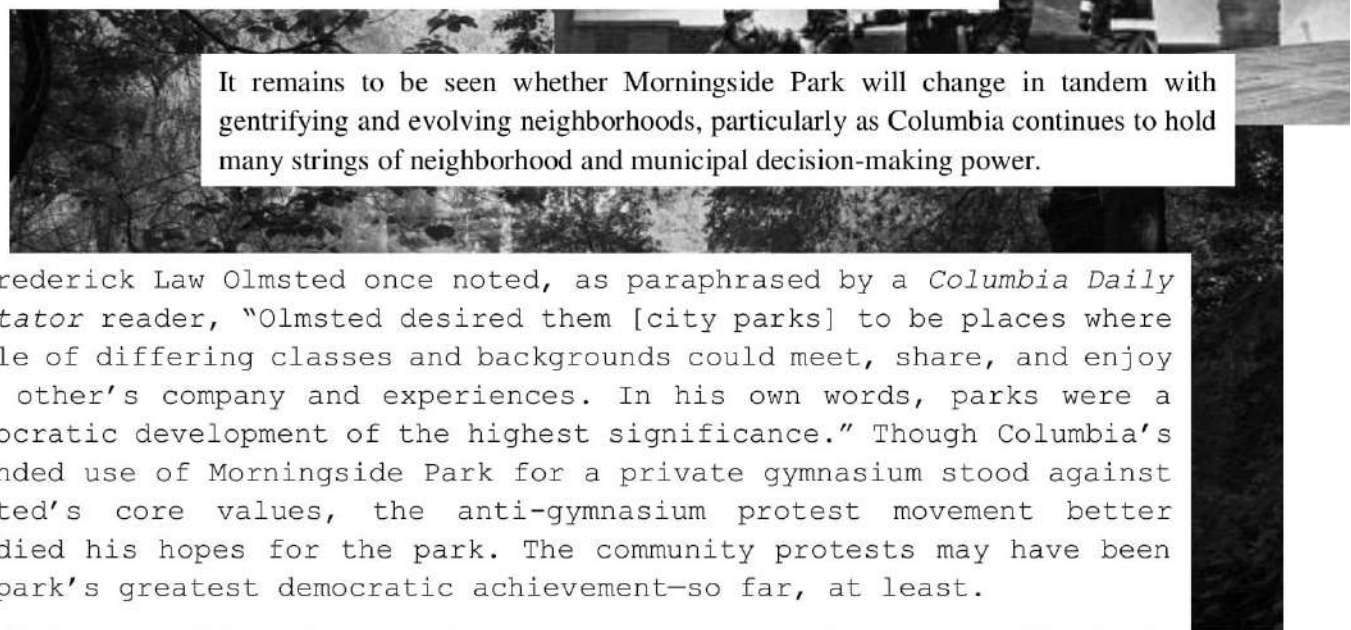
The former gymnasium site—consisting of a concrete foundation that never housed a building, and bulldozer trenches that did nothing but mar the landscape of the park—would remain untouched until the late 1980s. Eventually, the lease on the park was dissolved and Morningside Park reverted to the city in 1983. Morningside Park would continue to sink into disrepair around the remnants of the gymnasium.



In the early 1990s, the former concrete foundation of the gym was finally reconfigured into a waterfall and pond. The Friends of Morningside Park, a newly-formed nonprofit organization, pushed for a full park revitalization plan in 2000. But in terms of respectability and resources, Morningside Park continues to trail other New York green spaces in the public imagination, a legacy entangled with Columbia's neglect.



It remains to be seen whether Morningside Park will change in tandem with gentrifying and evolving neighborhoods, particularly as Columbia continues to hold many strings of neighborhood and municipal decision-making power.



As Frederick Law Olmsted once noted, as paraphrased by a *Columbia Daily Spectator* reader, "Olmsted desired them [city parks] to be places where people of differing classes and backgrounds could meet, share, and enjoy each other's company and experiences. In his own words, parks were a 'democratic development of the highest significance.'" Though Columbia's intended use of Morningside Park for a private gymnasium stood against Olmsted's core values, the anti-gymnasium protest movement better embodied his hopes for the park. The community protests may have been the park's greatest democratic achievement—so far, at least.

VISUAL MATERIALS ARE MOSTLY FROM (BUT NOT ENTIRELY LIMITED TO)

- o Columbia University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library
- o New York University's Tamiment Library
- o Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
- o *Columbia Daily Spectator*
- o *New York Amsterdam News*

PRIMARY SOURCE TEXTS AND CITES ARE FROM THE SAME ARCHIVES

I COULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN THIS THESIS/ZINE WITHOUT READING

- o Robert Blauner, "Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt" (1969)
- o Stefan Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (2009)
- o Charisse Burden-Stelly, "Cold War Culturalism and African Diaspora Theory: Some Theoretical Sketches" (2017)
- o Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967)
- o Michael Carriere, "Fighting the War Against Blight: Columbia University, Morningside Heights, Inc., and Counterinsurgent Urban Renewal" (2011)
- o Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (2014)
- o Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City* (2014)
- o Derek Hyra, *The New Urban Renewal: The Economic Transformation of Harlem and Bronzeville* (2008)
- o Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*

DOUBLE TRIPLE QUADRUPLE THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING: ANNETTE IGRA, THABITI WILLIS, KEVIN WOLFE, HARRY WILLIAMS, EVAN ROTHMAN, CLARA HESLER, AND MY PARENTS FOR ALL BEING GOOD, KIND VOICES WHO HAVE LISTENED TO ME YELL ABOUT URBAN PUBLIC SPACE FOR A MILLION MONTHS

stay tuned for more public history, zines, etc. you can contact me and catch me for updates at @nosiejaron.