

# The Station at Broadway and 125<sup>th</sup> Street

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## Introduction

The 125<sup>th</sup> Street station was the first elevated station on the Interborough Rapid Transit line. The current condition of the station does not reflect its landmark status, historic importance or aesthetic potential. Over the years, the station has served a diverse and changing neighborhood, which includes an ever-growing number of Columbia affiliates. It provides a unique vantage point, both literally and figuratively, from which Seth Low's vision of linking Columbia University to the City of New York can be brought to life, where Columbia, in the words of Seth Low, "cannot escape the observation of the City, nor can the City escape from it."

## The University and the Station

The 1/9 subway station on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway plays an important role in the life of the Columbia community. It serves the residents of two faculty apartment buildings on 125<sup>th</sup> Street, as well as Columbia Housing buildings on Claremont Avenue, Riverside Drive, and 122<sup>nd</sup> Street. With development plans for Prentis Hall and other Columbia real estate north of 125<sup>th</sup> Street, university affiliated ridership is bound to increase in the near future.

The station is also a point of interaction of the Columbia community with the diverse population of the neighborhood. Such a daily meeting place is a valuable resource for both the academic community and the local residents.

### *The Population: Census Data*

Recent census information highlights the diversity of the neighborhood around the subway station. The data regarding age distribution, for example, reveals a tremendous contrast between the populations north and south of the station.

### *Age Distribution: Census Data*

The relative number of children under 19 is higher north of the station, whereas the relative number of residents between the ages of 20-34 is significantly higher south of the station. These numbers reveal the strong presence of undergraduate and graduate student populations south of 125<sup>th</sup> Street, as opposed to family households north of 125<sup>th</sup>

#### *Racial Diversity: Census Data*

The composition of different ethnic groups around the station reveals striking variations. Even though the information regarding the census tract south of 125<sup>th</sup> street shows an almost even racial mix of Hispanics, Whites, and African-Americans, a closer look within the tract reveals significant differences from block to block. White population dominates along Claremont Avenue and in the Morningside Houses. African-Americans and Hispanics constitute an overwhelming majority in the Grant Houses. North of the station, the population is mostly African-American and Hispanic, again with amazing inconsistencies. Block 3002, for example, consists of 80 percent Hispanic residents. Overall, the picture drawn by the census reinforces the subway station as a meeting place that facilitates interaction between otherwise separate groups.

#### *Problems with Surroundings: Traffic*

A serious obstacle hindering safe and easy access to the station are the current traffic conditions at the busy intersection underneath the station. NYPD Precinct 26 has designated the intersection as an Accident Prone Location (APL), as it was the location of 169 accidents between September 1996 and September 1999. The Level of Service (LOS) in the intersection, a standard measurement of flow and functionality, was graded a C for the intersection as a whole, with D's and F's for some lanes and turns. Parking underneath the viaduct restricts safe-sight distances. Lighting and street geometry are not pedestrian friendly. Pedestrians have to run across the street because of poorly timed traffic lights. These problems can be addressed with added lighting, pedestrian islands, textured crosswalks, neck-downs, and concrete barriers, all of which exist below 121<sup>st</sup> Street on Broadway, and further east on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

### *Problems with Surroundings: Zoning*

As this map shows, the area to the northwest of the station is zoned for manufacturing and light industry. The area is underutilized and unpopular. Meatpacking and auto repair spill out onto the street and yet appear abandoned. Sidewalks are poorly maintained and lighting is inadequate. Cars speed through on their way to and from the Henry Hudson Parkway, and access to the riverfront is restricted by the Fairway supermarket parking lot. The current zoned uses are out of date and inefficient for a large, valuable area of riverfront land on the island of Manhattan. It seems only reasonable to assume that we will see redevelopment of the area in the near future.

### *Future Plans for the Harlem Piers*

The publicly funded Economic Development Corporation has chosen a plan entitled “Harlem on the River,” over four other alternatives. Columbia was one of many community groups actively involved in the design process. The plan envisions a mixed-use space with retail, entertainment, offices, research institutions, and recreation by the riverfront. The success of Fairway supermarket reveals community desire for high quality retail in the neighborhood. Planners are considering the feasibility of bringing ferry and train service back to 134<sup>th</sup> St. The 125<sup>th</sup> St. station would serve as the main gateway to the proposed community development, and must be able to handle higher volumes of riders and, most importantly, welcome them to the area. Unlike previously proposed plans, the current proposal was developed with community involvement.

### Rider Survey Data

#### **Graph of Responses to the Survey Question “To What Degree Do You Consider the Station a Part of Columbia?”**

The survey results show that the rider-ship reflects the composition of the neighborhood; and, the identification of the station with Columbia averaged slightly better than 3 out of 10. At the moment, 18% of riders are Columbia affiliates, and we expect this number to increase.

#### **Graph of Responses to the Survey Question “Which of the Following Concerns are Important to You?”**

The results show that riders have a broad range of concerns with the station, although no one complaint stands out. Our research confirms the necessity for many practical station improvements and explores the potential for more significant station enhancements.

### Station History

Going North on the IRT from the 116<sup>th</sup> Street station, the next stop is at 125<sup>th</sup> Street; the Morningside Heights plateau falls away at 122<sup>nd</sup> Street, and the train emerges from the dark tunnel extended with a stone embankment and onto the steel girders of a viaduct deck. As this sectional map of the IRT route shows, the viaduct is not only architecturally stunning but a practical necessity: it was chief engineer Parson's solution to Manhattan Valley. Manhattan Valley is by far the steepest grade along the route; elevating the tracks enabled Parsons to keep them level.

The viaduct runs above the median of Broadway to 135<sup>th</sup> Street. It is 2,174 feet long and reaches a maximum height of 54' above street level. In appealing for landmark designation of the viaduct, David Famberger stated: "With its bold masonry and graceful curves, the viaduct is both imposing and visually impressive, and is a major component of the IRT subway system."

A station was designated for a site at the middle of the viaduct span at 125<sup>th</sup> Street, which was crossed by an extraordinary 168.5 foot parabolic arch. The station connected the IRT with the Manhattan Street surface trolley, which already brought commuters from Hudson Pier #25, the landing of the ferry from Edgewater, New Jersey, to the Manhattan Street stop of the Eighth Avenue Elevated.

Photos document both the construction of the station and the subsequent growth of the immediate neighborhood. Between 1901 and 1904, the construction unfolded in the following sequence: the viaduct was built from both the North and South to Manhattan Street; then the three parallel ribs of the arch were assembled on the ground and lifted into place; the structure of the station platform came next.

In this sequence of photos, we also see the neighborhood being built up around the station. Parsons termed the land north of Morningside Heights “undeveloped countryside”: and while the Manhattanville enclave just north of the station was populated with 5,000 residents by 1850, the area was not yet highly developed. While 125th Street, originally called Manhattan Street, was paved, Broadway was entirely unpaved. The subway was instrumental in attracting development to the area.

On Thursday, October 27, 1904, the IRT had its first run, and the *Evening Mail* proclaimed that it got its most enthusiastic reception “passing over the viaduct across the Manhattan valley” for this was when the train emerged from underground to make a brief appearance to those on the street. *The New York Daily Tribune* wrote that “cheers from people in the streets and the tooting of whistles from several factories could be heard, and the whistle of the train responded.” *The New York Times* found symbolic meaning in the public reception: “the whole crowd surged up to the fence waving...yelling like mad at this beginning of fraternity between Harlem and City Hall Park.”

In 1931, the city removed the original street-level station house and created a station above ground, but still underneath the tracks. An elevated walkway was extended from the station and brought passengers to escalators which connected to the both the east and west sidewalks. The walkways were flooded with natural light from windows to the north and south, as was the station beneath the tracks

Residential development of the neighborhood continued with five and six-story brick structures with ground floor retail space, many of which are still there today. Interestingly, the intersection of 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway appears to be dominated by three types of stores: florists, cigar stores, and pharmacies. A two-story building on the Southwest corner of the intersection that has since been replaced with a McDonald's has rooftop advertising, apparently oriented to the subway riders for whom it is most visually accessible. There appears to no longer be any vacant land, Broadway has been paved, and trolley tracks are now found on both Broadway and Manhattan Street, which had since

been had been renamed 125<sup>th</sup> Street. We can see the importance of the subway to the neighborhood reflected – literally - in Broadway storefront windows

Many of the buildings which stand today were already present in the 1930s. The most dramatic change in the neighborhood occurred in the mid nineteen fifties with the construction of the General Grant and Morningside Garden Houses.

### Design

Our design proposal is guided by three goals:

1. To restore the station to its original, intended state and to reveal its unique historical and structural importance.
2. To identify sites for expression of community identity and to determine Columbia University's current role in this identity.
3. To take advantage of and emphasize qualities unique to the 125<sup>th</sup> Street station: the open-air station, the natural light, and, most importantly, the view of New York City and beyond, and to use these qualities to bring together station and neighborhood.

Our design proposal consists of two types of changes. First we offer relatively inexpensive solutions to practical problems. Our recommendations will allow riders to use the station with greater ease and will restore the station's historical identity. The second phase of proposed changes are larger, structural alterations of a more aesthetic nature that would complement the smaller improvements and have a pronounced effect on the character of the station both from above and below. While the first group of proposals would certainly improve the experience of the 125<sup>th</sup> Street station, the larger changes are essential to the fulfillment of the taskforce's vision of the station as a meeting point for a diverse neighborhood of diverse usage, in which Columbia University will play a crucial role. Both sets of changes promote the idea of transparency as a way of

simultaneously revealing and bringing together the neighborhood, its communities, and the station.

### Short Term Recommendations:

The most effective way to illustrate the necessary and desired changes is to move through the station, as do the riders. We will begin by stepping off the Uptown train onto the platform, situated above the eastern side of Broadway at 125<sup>th</sup> St.

#### *On the Platform*

Exiting the train onto the platform, the rider is directed, by two exit signs, to two stairways, used for both ascent and descent to the station. Two-thirds of the platform is partially enclosed with roofing and corrugated metal paneling, as illustrated above. The roof, a wooden structure on metal supports, is entirely rotted.

***Recommendation:* Replace the wooden covering with standing seam aluminum roofing, as is currently used at the Metro North station on 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue. Copper would be an ideal replacement, as it is more visually pleasing and makes a subtle reference to the buildings on Columbia's Morningside campus, but it would be significantly more expensive.**

The railing on the platform is the original railing installed in 1904. It has been covered with multiple layers of paint that are now chipping and obscure the attractive decorative elements. The color scheme – pink on the outside, green on inside, white for the viaduct – is irrelevant to the station and the neighborhood.

***Recommendation:* strip the paint and repaint the railing in either black or silver to highlight the exquisite detail of the original metalwork.**

The stunning view from platform level is only visible from the ends of the platform. The platform is situated approximately seven stories above street level and provides a view of the street below, the other viaducts that traverse the valley, the Hudson River, its New Jersey bank and the George Washington Bridge.

***Recommendation:* Place plaques on the railing that identify the sites to familiarize the rider with the neighborhood and to point out the unique placement of the station.**

At present, the only seats on the platform are underneath the covering.

***Recommendation:***

**Place additional seats placed on the open portion of the platform so that riders can take advantage of good weather and the view. Replace with the type made of a permeable metal weave that are currently used at the Metro North 125<sup>th</sup> Street station and are more attractive, comfortable and easier to clean than the wooden block type of seating that currently exists.**

If the rider turns around to look south from the platform, s/he notices that the tunnel wall, which comes out of the ground at 122<sup>nd</sup> St. and narrows as it approaches the station, is covered in graffiti.

***Recommendation:***

**Use this wall as a mural site. Although riders do not have long to look at it, there are many interesting artistic possibilities for this transitional space.**

***In the Station***

The rider walks down the stairs from the platform and onto a landing that sits between platform level and the interior station. A large, blank wall, approximately seven feet high, spans the width of the station.

***Recommendation:* Use this space for community art project. We suggest could be organized by Columbia University visual arts students and faculty who work in the neighborhood in the studios at Prentis Hall.**

The station house as it currently exists does not receive any natural light, except for the small amount that comes through the entrance to the stairwell to the street.

***Recommendation:* Remove the paneling from the original windows that run along the north and south walls of the structure, that have been boarded up. This relatively simple task would restore the interior to the naturally light and airy site that it was as recently as 1978, as illustrated in the historical report. Opening up the windows in the station house would necessitate shifting the maps and Metrocard**

**machines from their current positions in the station. Doing so, as indicated in our proposed plan, would open up space for a newsstand – no consumer services are currently offered in the station house.**

At the moment there is one, small LED display on the right side of the waiting area after the turnstiles that indicates the arrival of trains.

***Recommendation:* Replace this sign with an LED display before the turnstiles, that would hang from the ceiling as to be visible to riders entering from either side of the station.**

The entrances and exits to the station are an important issue. The escalators have been undergoing renovation for the last two years. The re-opening of these two escalators is of utmost importance to avoid crowding and to provide access to the station from both sides of Broadway. Additionally, the only way to leave the station has been to walk down a three-tiered flight of stairs. This option is problematic for many.

***Recommendation:* Reopen new escalators as soon as possible. Enclose them with transparent paneling as to decrease feelings of claustrophobia, give a cleaner appearance and provide natural light. Explore ways of creating handicapped access to the station.**

### Long Term Recommendations:

Walking away from the station, to either the east or the west, reveals the station atop the viaduct in full view. The pink and green pattern on the exterior the platform walls makes one wonder; the chipping paint on the viaduct detracts from its grace; the heavy, enclosed platform weighs down the patterned and penetrable metal web of the arch. This round of changes will deal with ways to restore the presence of the viaduct, create a more habitable space and establish the station's role as both an anchor for the neighborhood and an intersection, a place that will express its identity through its structure. Following are more dramatic proposals to develop the station as a destination place and a more inhabitable space for community it serves.

### *Light*

As it currently exists, the corrugated metal platform structure obliquely blocks all longitudinal light and views under the covered portion of the platform. It looms over the 125th Street intersection as a shoddily painted blocklike mass. In considering how to incorporate maximum natural light, we looked at examples of other train stations; included here are images of the proposed plan for the 2005 renovation of Penn Station designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and of the Central Station project in the Netherlands for 2007. They each demonstrate the priority of drawing natural light into a station, flooding even the platform levels with warm sunlight. In hopes of further developing the platform as the primary waiting area, we would also like to improve the lighting conditions of the platform proper. The current lighting scheme exposes the glaring fluorescent tubes just above eye level. Recessing the light into the roof structure would be a fairly simple procedure, as the roof rests on the open metal trusses. The reflected light would fill the space more subtly and unobtrusively, so as not to detract from new overhead LED displays, that we would like to introduce along the platform edge. They would display time, temperature, time until the next train, and service announcements.

There is also a small niche between the opposing stairwells to the landing below that can be enclosed for a temperature controlled waiting area. Because of the location of the stairs, the space is approximately seven feet wide and five feet deep. Examination from the underside of the station shows that a third set of stair cases used to exist 30 feet north of the existing north-facing staircases. It would be entirely feasible to push the north-facing stairs further to the north to increase the space for a temperature controlled

waiting area, a huge benefit for passengers who currently cannot escape exposure to the elements.

*Our final proposal addresses our desire to celebrate the viaduct as a historical landmark. Having been inspired by such lighting projects as the Second St Bridge in Indiana, the Lake Robbins Bridge in Texas and our very own George Washington Bridge, we propose that the 125th St viaduct deserves similar treatment.*

**Recommendation: Design a lighting scheme to show off the structure of the viaduct and identify it as a vital urban junction.**