On this morning, October 24, 2016, we assemble on this little square, at the feet of these two nearly finished and magnificent academic buildings, to mark the moment of inception of the new campus of Manhattanville – the most transformational expansion of Columbia University since the dedication of the Morningside Heights campus in 1896. In addition to these structures, housing the Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute and the Lenfest Center for the Arts, three historic buildings (Prentiss, Studebaker, and Nash) are already homes to University programs and activities.

Within the next five years, three additional buildings (The Forum), and two buildings of the Business School (Henry R. Kravis Building and Ronald O. Perelman Center for Business Innovation) will rise from their foundations, which we can see right now from this spot. Two more, one focusing on world issues and the other on new areas of exciting discovery in engineering and data science, are in advanced stages of dreaming.

Altogether, within a mere six years, there will be some six thousand Columbia faculty, students, and staff inhabiting this now somewhat ghostly site, all busily going about their lives and taking for granted what it took so many some fourteen years to create – which is exactly as it should be. And there will be countless interactions with our neighbors in the surrounding communities, from educational offerings to health centers to artistic engagements and beyond. Thousands of new employment opportunities will become available. (Still more – now counting eleven – buildings over the remainder of the century will complete the campus.)

In an era when many people are raising concerns about cities becoming superficial playgrounds for the wealthy, or static museums of their former vital selves, preserved in amber where nothing new is imagined, or created, or made or built, Columbia University’s presence here in Manhattanville, a
project of such scale and location in the urban core – something utterly unique in the experience of modern American higher education – bespeaks an opposite reality – a continuity of “making things,” from light manufacturing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the acts of discovery, transmission, and implementation of knowledge so defining of this and future centuries. From one factory to a new kind of factory, as it were.

Columbia University has a long and highly distinguished history, with origins predating the formation of the very nation it now serves (and even the birth of its presently most famous graduate, Alexander Hamilton). Established in 1754 in Lower Manhattan, where the island is “washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land,” as fellow Manhattanite Herman Melville wrote in Moby Dick, Columbia has forever fulfilled its elemental human need, as Melville further put it, to “get as nigh the water as … (one) possibly can without falling in.” And, so, the University has built its ship along the water’s edge, from Morningside Heights to Baker Field (in 1923) to our medical and health sciences campus in Washington Heights (in 1928) to the Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory in the 1940s. Now the addition of the Manhattanville campus, both physically and intellectually, must become our link—our spiritual plank—joining them all together into one seaworthy vessel.

I want to say only a few words about universities. Universities are dazzling institutions, the proof residing in their unique longevity and in their astounding production of new knowledge over time. They are also the strangest of institutions, a standing violation of every rule and rational expectation about how successful human organizations should be composed, which makes their success seem all the more brilliant and, in a way, dangerously satisfying. All that, however, does not mean we have arrived at a state of perfection in what we are or, even if we were able to become perfect at what we do, that we are all we might be. The prospects for advancement in human understanding are forever evolving, and so are the needs of humanity, which, in turn, must shape the nature and character of our mission to serve the public interest.

A truly great university, and Columbia is a truly great university, will continually ask itself whether it must change the ways in which it thinks and the ways in which serves. It is my personal opinion that the intellectual frameworks we have inherited are not presently in proper alignment with the most important human issues and problems facing the world today and that, even if that is not true, the extraordinary needs of the world right now constitute an urgent and irresistible call for universities to become more directly involved than we have in many years with the implementation of the knowledge and values we so zealously foster and protect. Be that as it may, the period of the unfolding of this new campus in Manhattanville should be a time in which we demonstrate that courage and confidence in ourselves to re-evaluate what we take to be important and the roles we should assume in the world.

I have said enough. It is a truism of life that the more important the moment the fewer the words the better. Respectful silence, or at most murmurs or chants or, best of all, music, speak more to the magnitude of the occasion than our ordinary words and sentences ever can. So I only say this: For this noble institution, today is a time of high celebration and gratitude, of optimism and eagerness to be better than we have ever been.

Thank you.