Columbia University Opens The Forum, a New Facility for Meeting and Discussion on Its Manhattanville Campus

Completing the First Group of Renzo Piano–designed Buildings, The Forum Provides a Gateway to an Urban Campus, Designed for both Academic and Civic Engagement

New York, NY, September 26, 2018—Columbia University President Lee C. Bollinger today joined Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano, founder and principal of Renzo Piano Building Workshop, to inaugurate The Forum: a new 56,000-square-foot, three-story facility that completes the first ensemble of new buildings on Columbia’s Manhattanville campus in West Harlem. The Forum adds long-needed space at Columbia for academic conferences, meetings and public discussion to the new campus’s already completed buildings dedicated to arts presentation and neuroscience research. The facility will serve the entire University community, while providing a welcoming, transparent gateway to the 17-acre campus for students, faculty, guest scholars and members of the general public.

Conceived as a new kind of open, urban campus to support Columbia’s academic mission while also providing a shared resource for the local community, the Manhattanville campus is publicly accessible throughout at street level, incorporating spaces for public engagement in all its buildings, as well as publicly accessible open
The Forum

spaces. Facilities already in use include free public programming such as a public neuroscience Education Lab for local students and adults of all ages, a community Wellness Center with screening and outreach programs designed and staffed by Columbia physicians, and the new home of Columbia’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery with a range of exhibits built around local artists and themes.

Triangular in plan to match its distinctive site at West 125th Street and Broadway, The Forum is visually transparent at street level like its RPBW-designed neighbors, the Lenfest Center for the Arts and the Jerome L. Greene Science Center. Anyone may pass freely from the sidewalk into a Forum café with Wi-Fi, an information center, and a ground-floor space where Columbia’s schools and divisions will offer programming. After the inaugural year, the program space will also be available by reservation for community groups. On the upper floors, The Forum houses a 437-seat auditorium, a variety of meeting rooms, and offices that will initially be used by two related University initiatives to address a range of public challenges facing our society: Columbia World Projects and the Obama Foundation Scholars.

“Sixteen years in the conceiving and making, the new campus in Manhattanville provides Columbia with the opportunity to do research and teach better in the present and also to have the freedom to imagine its future,” said Bollinger. “The Forum completes the spectacular triad of the first buildings on this new kind of urban campus, which reflects not only modern design, but modern values about how we can mutually benefit our local communities – defined by a visual openness and civic function that welcomes everyone in to participate in what only a truly great university can do.”

“In designing the master plan for the campus and its first three buildings, we wanted to help Columbia as a global university in the city and for the city,” said Piano. “So New York’s streets and sidewalks are woven into the fabric of the campus. This is not like the campus of earlier centuries. All the buildings are transparent, open to the public, and have amenities for the local community at street level, including plazas and green spaces for everyone to share. The architecture draws on the neighborhood’s industrial vocabulary, as you see for example with the exposed structural elements inside The Forum. We think of these buildings as machines – new kinds of machines for doing scientific research, for presenting the arts, and now, with The Forum, for bringing people together and communicating.”

Activities at The Forum

During the months after the official opening, The Forum will gradually become the site for a variety of academic and public programs from across the Columbia community. Among the first programs to be hosted at The Forum are:

• a day-long, international conference co-organized by the University’s Center for the Study of Social Difference and Women Creating Change, What We CAN Do When There’s Nothing To Be Done: Strategies for Change, on September 28, 2018

• Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today, a symposium organized in conjunction with the trailblazing exhibition that will open at the Wallach Art Gallery in the nearby Lenfest Center for the Arts, on November 8, 2018

The Forum’s 4,200-square-foot ground-floor café will offer a casual place for snacks and light meals, lingering for conversation over coffee, reading a book or connecting to Wi-Fi. For the more formal programs organized at The Forum, the café will also serve as a catering facility.
The Forum

Offices on the upper floors of The Forum are initially being used by two University-wide Columbia programs:

- Columbia World Projects, established in 2017, a new initiative that aims to bring university research systematically out into the world in the form of projects that will have a significant and lasting positive impact on people's lives and will help guide the way to solutions to intractable problems, while additionally enriching research and scholarship.

- The Obama Foundation Scholars at Columbia, part of Columbia World Projects, now welcoming its inaugural class of 12 rising change-makers from Asia, Africa, South America, South Asia and Europe for a year-long academic and civic leadership program designed to strengthen the expertise and knowledge of individuals with a demonstrated ability to be transformative leaders in their communities, nations and the world. From their base in The Forum, Columbia's Obama Foundation Scholars will participate in immersive learning across the University and New York City, along with networking, mentorship, service and leadership development activities led by the Obama Foundation.

In the future, other university programs and initiatives may be located in in The Forum's office spaces.

The Architecture of The Forum

Designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop with Dattner Architects as Executive Architect and Caples Jefferson Architects as Associate Architect, The Forum occupies a footprint of 17,846 square feet on a roughly triangular site at Broadway and West 125th Street, at the southeast corner of the 17-acre Manhattanville campus. The 56,000-square-foot building has one floor below grade and three above, rising to a height of 69 feet.

The functions accommodated within The Forum dictate the building's architectural vocabulary. The opacity needed for the largest volume within the building, the auditorium, is expressed on the façade with a skin of prefabricated concrete. The street-level urban layer and upper-floor offices are expressed with a glazed façade. Mechanical systems are made visible on the roof, in keeping with the intention to show The Forum as a purpose-built machine.

The 437-seat, two-level auditorium, located on floors two and three, has an area of approximately 4,000 square feet and rises to a height of 31 feet 10 inches, floor to ceiling. A projection booth and lighting and sound controls are housed at the rear of the balcony. Strategically placed wood panels on the walls and ceiling, designed by the project's theater, acoustic and IT consultant Arup, enhance the acoustics.

The Manhattanville campus's underground Central Energy Plant provides steam and chilled water used for heating and cooling.

The Manhattanville Campus

The largest and most ambitious capital project undertaken by Columbia University since its landmark Morningside Heights campus (McKim, Mead and White, dedicated 1896), the Manhattanville campus was proposed by University President Lee C. Bollinger in 2003. Its master plan for the onetime industrial zone by Renzo Piano Building Workshop (with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill as urban design team) – to provide the innovative academic space that will keep Columbia and New York City as a center of the world's research universities and provide civic amenities for the West Harlem community.
Defining Columbia’s building footprint for decades to come, the 17-acre campus is intended to create a different kind of space than in the past, with facilities that encourage the University-wide, cross-disciplinary interaction that is crucial to advances in all fields, and reflective of New York’s unique creative dynamism. At the same time, the open, sustainable campus is designed to deepen the connections between Columbia and its local community, so that the City and the University can engage and strengthen each other. The long-term plan will eventually create 6.8 million square feet of new academic space, as well as more than an acre of publicly accessible green space, landscaped paths, and street-level commercial and civic facilities open to the public.

Situated a few blocks northwest of Morningside Heights, the Manhattanville campus occupies an area from 125th Street to 133rd Street, and from either side of Broadway to 12th Avenue. The site was characterized since the late 19th century by industrial buildings, some of which are being adaptively reused amid the new construction.

Existing buildings to date on the Manhattanville campus are the 450,000-square-foot Jerome L. Greene Science Center housing the Mortimer B. Zuckerman Mind Brain Behavior Institute, the 60,000-square-foot Lenfest Center for the Arts housing presentation spaces for Columbia’s School of the Arts and the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, and the 10,000-square-foot Small Square at the nexus of the first three buildings, all designed by Renzo Piano Building Workshop.

The Jerome L. Greene Science Center and Lenfest Center for the Arts have both been awarded LEED® Gold certification. Public-facing amenities in the buildings include the Community Wellness Center, a facility that provides free blood pressure readings, cholesterol screening, and AIC glucose testing for neighborhood residents, and the Education Lab, which provides free Saturday Science classes and events throughout the school year in partnership with the mobile science lab BioBus.

A pair of buildings designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro for Columbia Business School – the Henry R. Kravis Building and the Ronald O. Perelman Center for Business Innovation – are currently under construction, grouped on either side of a one-acre Large Square one block north.

Distinct from the campus, but directly connected with it and financially supported by Columbia, is the West Harlem Piers Park on the Hudson River to the west of the new campus. The campus itself was awarded LEED-ND Platinum certification for Neighborhood Development, the first such pilot designation in New York and the first for a university campus nationally.

The Manhattanville campus joins several other examples of highly praised new architecture and design across Columbia’s campuses over the past decade, including, the Vagelos Education Center, designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro in 2016; the Northwest Corner Building, designed by Rafael Moneo, opened in 2010; the Campbell Sports Center at the Baker Athletics Complex, designed by Steven Holl Architects; and the Muscota Marsh project, designed by James Corner Field Operations, created public access to a scenic, environmentally restored waterfront, connecting Columbia’s Baker Athletics Complex to the popular Inwood Hill Park.

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