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**The Gould Memorial Library,  
one of the original University Heights campus buildings,  
completed in 1900.**

*Photograph: Themis Chronopoulos (2009).*

URBAN DECLINE AND THE  
WITHDRAWAL OF  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY  
FROM UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS,  
THE BRONX

*Themis Chronopoulos*

In 1973, New York University sold its Bronx campus located in University Heights and withdrew from the borough, after being there for eighty years. The campus then was occupied by Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. The official explanation about this transaction is that NYU was undergoing a serious financial crisis, which threatened the institution in its entirety, and that the sale of the Bronx campus allowed the university to reorganize itself and to chart a course toward fiscal sufficiency. This explanation has been provided by NYU, corroborated by state officials, accepted by the mass media, and supported by scholars of higher education. And yet, this explanation does not provide a full account of the reasons behind the sale. Although NYU experienced a severe fiscal crisis during this period, its University Heights campus became dispensable because of urban decline. The fiscal problems of NYU in the 1960s and early 1970s can mostly be attributed to low enrollments caused by perceptions of the decline of The Bronx. To be sure, there were other factors that contributed to the dismal budgetary performance of NYU, such as inflation, changes in federal policy, the rejection of students with average academic credentials, and the expansion of public higher education. However, these factors did not directly cause the sale of the University Heights campus.<sup>1</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, New York University was caught between its desire to become an elite national university and its need to boost its enrollments with local students. Unlike other private institutions, such as Columbia University, NYU heavily relied on tuition income

because of its lack of a substantial endowment and a high rate of indebtedness. This situation made NYU vulnerable to declines in student enrollments. In the postwar period, NYU overextended itself through the construction and acquisition of new facilities designed to accommodate an endlessly growing student population. These new facilities heavily added to the university's operational and debt service costs. In the late 1960s, however, enrollments declined rapidly at NYU. Between 1969 and 1971, the University Heights campus lost more than half of its students and that contributed to more than 40% of the entire institution's deficit. Although the rest of the university also faced budget problems, the University Heights campus became impossible to maintain.

### **The Years of Growth**

NYU, whose main campus had been located in Manhattan's Greenwich Village around Washington Square Park, moved most of its operations to the Fordham Heights neighborhood in the northwestern Bronx in 1894. This uptown movement occurred after NYU survived near bankruptcy in the 1880s and refused to become part of the more affluent Columbia University in 1892. Chancellor Henry Mitchell MacCracken felt that the Washington Square area was unsuitable for undergraduate education and for athletic activities because it had become too crowded, commercial, and industrial. He viewed the move to what later became the borough of The Bronx (in 1898) as a way to solve the problem of lack of space downtown, so that the university could build new libraries, residence halls, and laboratories.

Built by Stanford White, NYU's Bronx campus overlooked the Harlem River and provided the university with an attractive residential college not too far from the center of the growing city. During the following eighty years, the NYU campus dominated the surrounding Bronx neighborhood, which took the name of University Heights. After some years of decline, the Washington Square campus began to grow again, in the early part of the twentieth century, when NYU decided to invest in both of its campuses instead of concentrating just in The Bronx. For most of the twentieth century, the University Heights part remained a smaller more selective institution of NYU, with University College and the School of Engineering and Science located there, while the Washington Square part became a larger more inclusive campus with expanded graduate and professional education offerings. Enrollments continued to grow until the eve of the U.S. involvement in World War I. During the war, enrollments declined and NYU survived only after making its University Heights campus a technical training center for military personnel.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1920s, NYU attempted to make the University Heights campus an exclusive place for "American" or "Americanized" students from around the country. This meant the reduction of local Jewish students

from approximately 50% in 1919 to 31% in 1921. Chancellor Elmer Ellsworth Brown claimed that NYU had been deluged by recent immigrants from the Lower East Side who could gain admission but “whose cultural background was dismally un-American.” This policy failed because the uptown campus was unable to attract donations from affluent philanthropists and students from other parts of the country were unwilling to attend NYU. The smaller enrollments of University Heights became an increasing drain to the budget of the university. Because of this, the Bronx campus quietly reversed its exclusion of Jewish people and began to heavily recruit students of all backgrounds, who attended the public schools of the city and could show a decent scholastic performance. During this period, the Washington Square campus flourished because it did not exclude students on the basis of ethnicity or religion and did not pretend to have high academic standards.<sup>3</sup>

The abandonment of selective admissions allowed NYU to become the most popular university in the New York metropolitan area and the largest urban university in the United States. Its enrollment surpassed the 40,000 figure in the 1929-1930 academic year and grew even during the Great Depression. Although enrollments declined during World War II by about 30%, from a high of 47,525 students in 1938-1939, NYU was able to maintain itself financially by providing instruction to enlisted men. In the immediate postwar period, the G.I. Bill and a general desire for higher education among New Yorkers, allowed enrollment to surpass the 70,000 student mark. NYU became known as the “school of opportunity” because of its virtual open admissions. What was missing from this image was that most of the freshmen never graduated from NYU, since they could not fulfill academic standards.<sup>4</sup>

In 1962, newly inaugurated president James M. Hester attempted to refashion NYU into a first-rate national university. Competition for students from the growing City University of New York, which charged no tuition and had lowered its admissions standards, and the recently established State University of New York, which charged significantly less and enjoyed the unconditional support of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, led Hester to the decision of raising admission standards. He argued that prospective students would not be willing to pay NYU's high tuition rates, unless its quality of instruction surpassed that of public universities. Hester viewed an improved student cohort to be part of the solution. To that end, he rejected the widely cited notions that NYU would admit anyone with a warm body and enough money to pay tuition and that NYU was an educational factory supplied by the subway.

Under Hester's leadership, the university cut off the lower 20% of undergraduate applicants, recruited students from around the country, hired prestigious faculty, and expanded its dormitory and faculty housing holdings. By the mid-1960s it appeared that NYU was on its way of

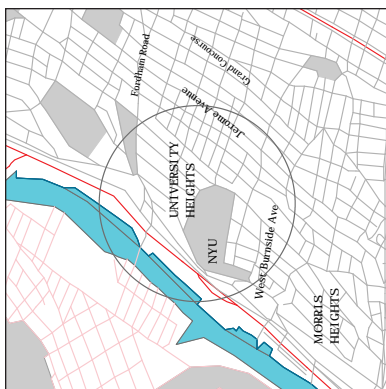


becoming a national research university, though its freshman class had declined by about one-third. These fewer admitted undergraduates had better high school grades and higher scores in standardized tests. More than this, 58.5% of NYU's freshmen were from outside the city in 1965 as opposed to 35% in 1961, while 4,021 students lived in its dorms in 1966 as opposed to 1,867 in 1961. The number of faculty living in university housing increased from 85 to 1,100.

Despite a new more competitive graduate admissions regime, the number of graduate students also increased from 3,293 in 1961 to 7,071 in 1966, while the money allocated for research rose from \$21 million in 1961 to \$37.5 million in 1966. These reforms persuaded the Ford Foundation to offer NYU its maximum institutional improvement grant of \$25 million to be matched by \$75 million raised by the university. NYU raised this amount by 1967.<sup>3</sup>

These improvements, which mostly took place in Washington Square, undermined the institutional position of the University Heights campus. The operation of multiple campuses has always been a challenge for university administrators and the place of the smaller University Heights campus became increasingly questionable for NYU in the 1960s. The central administration attempted to clarify the place of University Heights by providing it with more autonomy over budgetary decisions, but this confused matters even more. Problems persisted given that many academic functions in University Heights were duplicated in Washington Square and the two main academic entities of the Heights—University College and the School of Engineering and Science—had divergent needs and goals.

The administrators and faculty members of these two academic entities were unified only by their concern over the central administration's dedication to University Heights. They argued that most of the rebuilding had taken place in the Washington Square campus and that improvement plans in the Bronx campus had experienced unnecessary delays. Hester



Map on opposite page, and closeup at left, of University Heights in relation to the southern Bronx and northern Manhattan. University Heights appears in a circle, which roughly covers the neighborhood. In precise terms, University Heights is bounded to the north by Fordham Road, to the east by Jerome Avenue, to the south by Burnside Avenue, and to the west by the Harlem River.

assured these critics that NYU was deeply committed to the mission of the University Heights campus, though these assurances were not necessarily accompanied with actions. If anything, the administration of the university considered the transfer of whatever graduate programs existed in University Heights to Washington Square, which was viewed as the center of graduate education. The withdrawal of graduate education from University Heights at a time that NYU was becoming more of a research institution did not bode well for the Bronx campus. University Heights remained an elite academic entity within the larger institution, but its status as the crown jewel of NYU was increasingly being compromised.<sup>6</sup>

### **“The New Depression in Higher Education”**

In 1970, at the request of various university presidents, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education undertook a study of university finances. Directed by Earl F. Cheit, the findings of the study were published under the title of *The New Depression in Higher Education*. The 250-page study claimed that two-thirds of the nation's colleges and universities were on their way to financial crisis or already in financial crisis. Although university costs and income were both rising, costs were increasing at a more rapid rate, meaning that universities had to find new sources of income and cut costs. The study found that the financial crisis in higher education arose two to three years before 1970 and that it followed a decade of unprecedented expansion. Many of the universities became accustomed to the years of expansion and did not anticipate the financial trouble. Institutions that overextended themselves during this period became more vulnerable to the decline. The study found that there were several reasons for the financial crisis in higher education and that each institution had its own unique problems. However, it identified six main problems that contributed to rising costs: high inflation, increased student aid, rising faculty salaries, more research activities, the creation of new programs, and the cost of student protests. The study argued that most universities and colleges required more generous assistance from the state and federal governments so that they could continue to operate without compromising academic quality or cutting academic programs while they reorganized themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Other studies on higher education during the early 1970s concurred with the Carnegie Commission findings and provided additional observations. William W. Jellema argued that the gap between cost and income that universities and colleges began to face in the late 1960s was more severe than previous ones. In the postwar period, the cost of higher education rose because many institutions increased their academic offerings, set higher aspirations, and came across ferocious competition for grants and donations. At the same time, inflation climbed upward, skepticism toward higher education came into place, and the gap between the tuition charged at private and public institutions widened. Hans H. Jenny and G.



Richard Wynn characterized the period between 1960 and 1968 as the “golden years” of higher education and argued that the underlying assumptions that characterized them no longer existed and could not be restored.<sup>8</sup>

For NYU, the golden years began in the immediate postwar period when student enrollments skyrocketed; in response, the university embarked on a physical development frenzy that was not completed until the early 1970s. In Manhattan’s Turtle Bay, NYU and Bellevue Hospital utilized eminent domain and urban renewal in order to expand their facilities and create the New York University-Bellevue Medical Center (1944-1963). At Washington Square, NYU also utilized urban renewal among other methods in order to build the Vanderbilt Law School (1951), the Loeb Student Center (1960), the Joe Weinstein Residence Hall (1962), the Meyer Hall of Physics (1972), the Tisch Hall (1972), the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library and Study Center (1973), and numerous other facilities.

In 1964, NYU purchased Washington Square Village, which was a sizable urban renewal project south of Washington Square, with almost 1,300 apartments and an underground garage for 650 automobiles. Right next to this project, NYU built University Village, a three-tower residential development (1966). Finally, Hester hired architect Philip Johnson to develop a master plan for the Washington Square campus, which resembled a hodge-podge of buildings scattered around Greenwich Village without any focus. Construction also commenced in University Heights. In 1956-58, Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith prepared a new master plan for the campus, the first since McKim, Mead, and White had created the original master plan in the 1890s. In order to meet the projected needs of the campus community, Breuer designed two major building complexes. The first, which was completed in 1964, was comprised of the Julius Silver Residence Center and Cafeteria, the Gould Hall of Technology, and a lecture hall. The second, which opened in 1969 and was named Technology Center II, included laboratories, faculty offices, and classrooms. NYU also purchased properties such as Fitch Hospital (1965) located next to the campus in University Heights for dormitory use and future expansion.<sup>9</sup>

Although the ambitious development plans threatened to overextend the institution, its administrators were optimistic of the future. By the early 1950s, NYU officials viewed physical development as a way to construct a multiversity that could rival Columbia. Successful fundraising campaigns fueled the optimism of these officials. In 1945, NYU inaugurated a \$30-million campaign for its medical school and the university was able to raise the money in a few years. In 1954, NYU set a 10-year, \$102-million fundraising goal; by 1963, NYU had exceeded this goal by \$24 million. Between 1964 and 1967, NYU raised another \$100 million, an amount that included Ford Foundation’s \$25 million grant. Then in 1969, NYU set a new \$222.5-million, five-year goal. In the 1940s and the 1950s, these funds came on top of increased tuition revenues. The institution’s

plans grew so ambitious that even Robert Moses, who usually supported NYU's expansionary designs, could not provide the amount of land that its administrators were requesting for development. NYU officials searched for land everywhere including the proposed Lincoln Center, where they wanted to open an arts center. However, Fordham University and Cardinal Francis Spellman outmaneuvered NYU over Lincoln Square.<sup>10</sup>

The postwar real estate decisions caught up with NYU after 1965. New construction was tied to optimistic projected enrollments that did not materialize. NYU continued to construct sizable projects and to finance them with debt, hoping that declining enrollments were not permanent. Between 1966 and 1970, NYU's capital development debt rose from \$82 million to \$123 million. Many of the new buildings were underutilized. Tisch Hall, which was intended to accommodate more than 1,700 School of Commerce students, actually serviced less than 1,400 when it was completed. One-third of the Julius Silver dormitory in the University Heights campus was empty and many of its tenants were Fordham students. In the same campus, the cost of building Technology Center II grew by 50% in the late 1960s, while the expectation that enrollments of engineering students would increase by 1,000 proved false. During the construction of the \$25-million Bobst Library, the quarry that supplied the sandstone for its exterior went out of business. NYU loaned money to the quarry operator to reopen and basically took over the business because no one else made that particular sandstone and part of the library had already been built. By 1972, many half-empty new buildings were adding to operating costs, investment rental properties around Washington Square were performing badly, and many prospective students were attending college elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

The persistence of declining enrollments surprised NYU officials who were used to unfettered growth. NYU's decision to suddenly reject students with poor academic records rather than improve the institution on a gradual basis was not financially sound. Immediately, the university ran deficits and by the mid-1960s it was using millions from the \$100-million fundraising infusion to cover operating expenses. Tuition increases failed to fill the shortfalls while rising inflation made the costs of daily operation more expensive. During the late 1960s, enrollments declined even more rapidly. NYU officials refused to lower the admission standards for some programs, fearing that the prestige of the entire university would be compromised. By 1972, overall enrollment stood at less than 40,000 students, down from 45,000 students a few years before. Many of the undergraduates who no longer went to NYU were from out-of-state. Their numbers diminished to 10.2% of the entire student body in 1972. It stood at 20.5% only two years before. In 1968, when graduate enrollments declined to 1,000 below the predicted number, NYU administrators cited the abolition of graduate student draft deferments by the federal government. They expected enrollments to climb back up. However, in the following years, they decreased even more. At University Heights, the opening of Technology Center II in

1969 added \$800,000 to the annual operating expenses. As the Vietnam War heated up, federal deficits inflated and the government cut funds allocated for research and graduate education, ending the post-Sputnik investment in higher education. NYU, which ranked 11th in the nation and 2nd in the state in total receipt of federal funds, suffered. As a result, the School of Engineering and Science in University Heights developed particularly large deficits and many students became reluctant to pursue an engineering or a science degree. Reductions in federal aid also adversely affected the School of Social Work and the medical school.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 1960s, the State of New York increased its assistance to private colleges and universities because of their severe budget problems. In 1968, the state legislature passed Governor Rockefeller's Bundy Act, which provided direct unrestricted annual aid to private nonsectarian colleges and universities. In the three years that followed 1968, the state's five largest private institutions, which granted more than half of doctoral degrees in New York, cut their capital budgets by \$77 million, increased their tuition at a rapid pace, and received assistance from the state. Still, in 1971 the deficit of these universities approximated the \$30-million figure. Between 1969 and 1971, NYU received \$9.3 million in general state aid under the Bundy Act. NYU's medical school received an additional \$750,000 from the state. Even with that state aid, 83% of NYU's educational income came from student fees because of its small unrestricted endowment. For its 1971-72 academic year, NYU estimated a near \$10-million operating budget deficit. Almost half of the deficit came from the Bronx campus.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, NYU's crisis was the result of declining enrollments at a time that its administrators had expanded its physical plant to accommodate rising enrollments. The question that remains is why did enrollments at NYU and its University Heights campus decline so rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s? Perceptions of the condition of New York City and of The Bronx during this period provide part of the answer.

### **NYU and Urban Decline**

In the beginning of 1972, Bertram Gelfand, a City Council member, blasted NYU for considering the sale of its University Heights campus. Just like many residents of the area, Gelfand, who represented the district where University Heights was located, was puzzled by the proposed withdrawal of NYU after years of explosive growth. Gelfand threatened to introduce legislation in the City Council that would block the sale of the University Heights campus to the state.<sup>14</sup>

Hester wrote a letter to Gelfand in which he outlined the problems that the University Heights campus was facing; some of the problems had directly to do with the urban conditions of The Bronx. In most of the letter, Hester went through a list of problems that universities had been

encountering in many parts of the country. He argued that inflation had created many challenges, since nationally prices had risen 23% between 1967 and 1972 and in New York City that figure was 28%. Moreover, between 1969 and 1972, classroom hours taught in the School of Engineering fell by 32%, reflecting the steep decline of engineering enrollments at University Heights. Between 1968 and 1972, government sponsored research and training fell by more than a million dollars, putting even more budgetary pressures to NYU. However, Hester's letter also touched on specific urban conditions at University Heights: "the rapid change in the neighborhood has made it necessary for us to increase security costs, from \$132,804 in 1965-66 to \$380,000 in 1971-72, and has reduced the appeal of the Heights for out-of-town students." This claim verified accounts that the University Heights campus was increasingly becoming a fortress disconnected from the surrounding community and that many out-of-town students were not willing to attend NYU because of the bad publicity that The Bronx and New York City had been receiving.<sup>15</sup>

Within NYU, concerns with conditions in The Bronx arose after the mid-1960s. In 1967, NYU conducted a study of changing conditions in The Bronx. Hester was relieved to find that the newspaper of the University Heights campus, *Heights Daily News*, did not emphasize unfavorable conditions in the area, after some of its members attended an institutional meeting regarding the West Bronx. Hester wrote: "I am sorry to have been unduly concerned about the possibility of exaggeration of the negative aspects of the situation when I spoke with you in the telephone, but, as you realize, I do have to be careful in raising any questions about the University not to start rumors that damage morale." NYU did not want to publicize problems in The Bronx because enrollments would potentially decline even more. Unlike other universities that used reports of declining urban conditions to receive financial benefits and urban redevelopment permits from the city and state governments, NYU could not make such a case because University Heights was still a middle class neighborhood. But anxieties about the situation in The Bronx remained and intensified. In 1968, Hester asked NYU economist and regional planner Emanuel Tobier to conduct another study. By May of 1969, the primary concerns of the President's Council of University College were "matters relating to campus security and the deterioration of the Bronx neighborhood."<sup>16</sup>

In the *Plan for New York City*, a comprehensive planning document released by the City of New York in 1969, University Heights was presented along with other areas such as the Concourse, Tremont, Morris Heights, and Fordham Heights; all of these areas comprised Bronx Community Planning District 5. The plan argued that the area was the home of important institutions and that its housing stock was sound. However, it also stated that "problems have emerged that stem from ghetto conditions in Morrisania and the South Bronx and from a changing and aging population." The City of New York had designated Community

Planning District 5, which included the University Heights campus, as a preventive renewal area, because it contained a few pockets of urban blight that could potentially spread to adjacent areas. According to city planning officials, many ambitious African American and Puerto Rican families were following the path that Jewish and Irish families had followed decades before and were moving to the area. In 1960, 5% out of 137,000 residents of the district were African American; by 1969, the total population had declined to 127,000 and one-fifth of the residents were African Americans or Puerto Ricans. This demographic change had created some racial tensions in the neighborhood. Not much was written specifically about University Heights in the *Plan for New York City* because the area was considered to be doing well, especially when compared to areas located south and east of it. However, city planners were concerned with the movement of many young families away from the West Bronx and toward the edges of the city or to the suburbs.<sup>17</sup>

In the postwar period, many universities found themselves ill at ease with their urban environment. This was not necessarily the first time that many of these institutions had problems with the city. In the nineteenth century, the University of Pennsylvania had fled the growing center of Philadelphia, Johns Hopkins University moved away from central Baltimore, Columbia University relocated from midtown Manhattan to uptown's Morningside Heights, and NYU had considered The Bronx to be a more appropriate location than Washington Square. After World War II, dissatisfaction with the city emerged once again, though relocation options were more limited. Many university officials felt that their institutions had been engulfed by slums and became uneasy with the rising numbers of African Americans there. Columbia University created buffer zones between black Harlem and Morningside Heights through urban renewal and displaced many low income residents from its surrounding area. The University of Chicago took similar measures in its efforts to clearly demarcate its own neighborhood Hyde Park and South Kenwood from the African American South Side. As many urban areas experienced racial succession, universities engaged in neighborhood defense.<sup>18</sup>

Institutions of higher learning subscribed to widely held assumptions about urban decline. These assumptions included the idea that racially mixed and minority neighborhoods were undesirable, that urban blight spread from block to block and from building to building, and that slum clearance and urban redevelopment were the best ways to combat neighborhood decline. These assumptions also dominated debates over the future of The Bronx.

Unlike other universities, NYU attempted to embrace its location in the city during the 1960s. Once he became president of NYU, Hester advocated the engagement of the institution with the city. In a speech that he delivered in the Town Hall of Los Angeles, Hester said that he was

the spokesman of an urban university, which “not only finds itself in a city but also welcomes that fact and turns the city into its laboratory, its campus, its source of special strength and influence.” Although Hester admitted that many students and their parents viewed college as a way to escape the pressures of real life so that they could spend some years of contemplation and fun, he insisted that a new national attitude toward cities encouraged the involvement of students in urban settings and their participation in social service. For Hester, urban universities had the responsibility of improving the city and educating its future leaders. In the years that followed, NYU integrated urban affairs themes in undergraduate and graduate courses and started new programs such as a metropolitan leadership program at University College and the first urban anthropology department in the world.<sup>19</sup>

Hester’s initiatives were not necessarily corresponding to the university’s actions. Before Hester took office, NYU used slum clearance in order to remove unwanted neighbors in Washington Square Village and in Turtle Bay. To be sure, in many of these cases NYU used urban renewal in order to expand rather than to just uproot its neighbors, but the result was the same. Residents of Greenwich Village had objected to many of NYU’s expansionary plans, including the construction of Bobst Library, which was built between 1967 and 1973, while Hester was the institution’s president. Furthermore, many minority residents of the neighborhoods near the University Heights campus complained that NYU had been turning inward and was disengaged from the community. Efforts to change this state of affairs in The Bronx were short-lived. In 1967, NYU had a meeting with the Mayor’s Cabinet. NYU representatives emphasized the potential involvement of the university’s professional schools in community projects. Brooke Hindle, Dean of University College, wrote to Hester to complain that initiatives that had already been undertaken by members of the Bronx campus were not emphasized in the meeting and that the liberal arts were not included in the discussions. Hester took the complaint into consideration and encouraged the Bronx campus to intensify its community affairs efforts. In response, the University Heights campus designed a summer community project for the summer of 1968. This project consisted of “Head Start” programs for 5-year olds, tutoring for 6 to 11 year olds, and recreational activities for 12 to 16 year olds. The participants of the project were undergraduate students who worked under professional supervisors and faculty advisors. Overall, the project serviced about 400 Bronx youngsters, most of whom were African Americans and Puerto Ricans and lived within walking distance from NYU’s University Heights campus. Despite the success of the project, NYU lacked the money to sponsor it again. NYU’s disengagement with The Bronx resumed.<sup>20</sup>

Serious concerns over the future of the West Bronx emerged in the mid-1960s. In 1965, a *New York Times* article raised questions over the future of the Grand Concourse as a symbol of prosperity. Since the 1920s, the

Grand Concourse had functioned as The Bronx's most fashionable avenue, with many upwardly mobile families trying to move to it or in blocks adjacent to it. The eastern boundary of University Heights was Jerome Avenue, located just four blocks from the Grand Concourse, between Fordham Road and Burnside Avenue. According to conventional wisdom, any problems in the Grand Concourse would be felt in University Heights. The *New York Times* article reported that many young people left the Grand Concourse and its surroundings for areas in which the environment was "unstifling and the atmosphere unmiddle-class." Lenore Feldman, a junior at Music and Art High School characterized the Grand Concourse as "all so middle-class. There are middle-class values here, middle-class prejudices and middle-class people." Many recent college graduates from the apartments in the Grand Concourse decided to distance themselves from the areas of their upbringing by moving to Manhattan. Of course, moving to Manhattan made sense for them since they could live closer to work, which was usually located in downtown and midtown Manhattan. These young people could also take advantage of the cultural infrastructure that Lower Manhattan offered and The Bronx lacked. Additionally, unlike previous generations, young middle class Bronxites valued their independence and had no interest in living with their parents, or close to them, as adults.<sup>21</sup>

Suburbanization trends of the period further cast doubt as to the future of the middle class apartment in The Bronx. According to Edith Bigman, a young social worker, many people of her generation with families moved to the suburbs. The Grand Concourse, with no off-street parking, distant from employment and entertainment typically found in Manhattan, and without the conveniences found in newer suburban homes, had become unattractive to many young people with families. Moving a bit further from the center of the city to the suburbs and their amenities seemed sensible. But Bigman also added that suburbanization could be due to racial changes: "A lot of people are simply afraid of integration. . . . Negroes are moving onto the side streets and a lot of people who aren't admitting it are just plain frightened."<sup>22</sup>

Two more newspaper articles, one in *The New York Times* and another in the *New York Post* published in 1966 and 1967, added to the impression that the Grand Concourse could be declining, and this time the matter of racial invasion was openly discussed. The articles argued that minority influx had increased, elderly white residents had stopped going out at night because of crime, and the white population was "on the edge of panic." The *Post* story stated that Co-Op City, a Mitchell-Lama middle income cooperative development at the northeastern reaches of The Bronx that opened in late 1968, and would house 15,000 families, had received about 80% of its applications for its first building from people in the Concourse area. The same article said that the city government con-

sidered leasing vacant apartments along the Grand Concourse and renting them to whites so that it could maintain a tenant ratio of four whites to each non-white in the area. This lease strategy would be the first of its kind in the history of New York City.<sup>23</sup>

These articles and the ensuing alarm they caused to Grand Concourse middle class whites, many of whom were Jewish, prompted the American Jewish Congress to study the area and produce a report whose findings revealed absolutely no basis for the panic. The area they researched, bounded by Fordham Road, 161st Street, Webster Avenue, and Jerome Avenue, covered all of the Concourse locations considered in decline and included interviews with hundreds of residents and the use of statistics and other data from local and city-wide institutions and the government. The study concluded that at least 75% of the people who lived in the area were non-Spanish speaking whites, as were 95% of people who lived in buildings that faced the Grand Concourse. White people lived in large numbers in all parts of the area, despite a concentration of Puerto Ricans and African Americans in the southeast portion of the area, all of whom the study considered middle class. Researchers found the quality of housing and maintenance to be very good and, in the few buildings in which deterioration could be noticed, it had happened because of landlord neglect rather than vandalism. No mass exodus of long time residents from the area could be documented. Instead, the vacancy rate had lingered at the level of less than 1% for more than a decade, while only 15% of applications to Co-Op City had come from the Concourse area. Finally, since 1960, crime above 170th Street had decreased while below 170th Street crime had increased but was still much lower than the New York City average, and, in fact, juvenile delinquency in the same area had declined.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, panic over racial transition endured. City and borough government officials, alarmed by the newspaper articles and under pressure from Bronx real estate interests, politicians, and community improvement organizations, embarked on a number of upgrades to the area. A joint community-government organization called Concourse Action Program and another called A Better Concourse, Inc., sought the rehabilitation of public spaces fallen into visible disrepair, the planting of hundreds of trees, the installation of modern lighting fixtures of the type installed along the Avenue of the Americas in Manhattan, an increase in building inspections, and the rise of police presence in the area. Besides infrastructural and security improvements, many of the efforts focused on reassuring residents that the government would make its best effort to maintain the whiteness of the Grand Concourse.<sup>25</sup>

These reports were catastrophic for NYU, which had marketed its Bronx campus as a place where students could pursue academic excellence in an exclusive environment. Unlike the Washington Square campus, which appealed to more adventurous students who were attracted by the





**Technology Center II was one of the last building complexes to be completed by Marcel Breuer & Associates just before NYU sold the campus to the City University Construction Fund for Bronx Community College.**

*Photograph: Themis Chronopoulos (2008).*

vibrant social and cultural activity of Greenwich Village and did not mind the complexities of urban life, the Bronx campus was viewed as a place where students had the advantage of engaging the city without necessarily being part of it. The idea was that students in The Bronx could always withdraw to the tranquility of University Heights.

As stories about the decline of the Grand Concourse and areas nearby emerged in the mass media, many students and their families became concerned with the location of NYU's uptown campus. Enrollments in that campus decreased by 15% in 1969, 20% in 1970, and 40% in 1971. In 1972, the enrollments of undergraduates dropped even more and NYU administrators blamed excessive negative publicity about crime. Many

prospective students were also overwhelmed by reports about arson. Between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a few Jewish institutions in University Heights and the Concourse area were damaged by suspicious fires. Other buildings near the campus were also consumed by fire. Even the University Heights campus was unable to avoid arson. In two separate incidents, fires damaged two of NYU's libraries. Furthermore, by the late 1960s, riders of the IRT subway line—which was elevated in most of The Bronx and went through Jerome Avenue—witnessed an increasing number of burned down buildings south of Burnside Avenue. Drivers who found themselves in the streets of neighborhoods south of University Heights also encountered signs of urban decline such as abandoned vehicles, destroyed buildings, and debris-filled streets. It appeared that urban blight was spreading northward and westward and that it was threatening University Heights.<sup>26</sup>

Under these circumstances and without any funds to reorganize itself, NYU sold its University Heights campus to the City University Construction Fund for \$62 million. The sale was approved by the state in 1972. The transfer of the campus occurred in 1973. Under the original proposal, the Bronx campus was to become an engineering and technological campus of the State University of New York. However, the City University of New York objected over the encroachment of SUNY into the City of New York, and Brooklyn politicians lobbied for the bail out of another engineering school, the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. In the end, CUNY purchased the University Heights campus and transferred it to The Bronx Community College, which then had no permanent facilities. NYU's engineering school became part of Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, renamed the Polytechnic Institute of New York. (Oddly enough, in 2008 it rejoined NYU to become Polytechnic Institute of New York University.) University College relocated to the Washington Square campus and merged with Washington Square College.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

NYU's University Heights campus became dispensable because of urban decline. Problems that emerged in portions of The Bronx south and east of University Heights undermined the reasons that had originally made the Bronx campus unique. By 1970, the University Heights campus was running more than 40% of the entire university's deficits. Students who wanted to attend NYU, preferred the Washington Square campus, with its more lively and convenient location. Students seeking an exclusive residential campus chose to attend colleges located in the countryside. Even without a financial crisis, NYU would have problems maintaining its presence in University Heights, unless it completely redefined the mission of its uptown campus.

In 1973, when NYU was exiting from its Bronx location, journalists of the student newspaper canvassed University Heights seeking to capture

the sentiment of residents and shopkeepers; they discovered that views about NYU reflected the neighborhood's racial divide. Older, more established members of the community were attached to the institution and were reminiscing of the old days when NYU was the focal point of the neighborhood. Owners who had operated shops in the area for a long time were planning to sell and move away, because they expected the neighborhood to downgrade. Many longtime residents were considering relocation as well. They complained that only a few penny candy stores, pastry shops, Kosher restaurants, high quality butchers, and vegetable shops were remaining and that their replacement with bodegas, fried chicken outlets, and luncheonettes serving pork indicated the decline of the area. Almost all of these individuals were white.

Newcomers, who were mostly African American and Latino, were not attached to NYU and did not care that the institution was leaving. Some of them did not even know that NYU was leaving the area. Others complained that NYU had ignored them and that the university was not interested in establishing rapport with minorities and with low income people. Younger people were happy that Bronx Community College was taking the place of NYU, because they were planning to attend college there.<sup>28</sup>

Despite criticisms that the State of New York and the City University of New York bailed out a private institution by overpaying for the University Heights campus, this outcome was preferable to a number of others. NYU could no longer maintain its University Heights campus and the possibility of abandoning it existed. The shutting down and abandonment of such institutions represent traumatic experiences for their surrounding communities and a "deserted" campus could linger in the neighborhood for many years adding to perceptions of decline. NYU might have faced the possibility of shutting down in its entirety without the proceeds from the sale of its uptown campus. The sale helped for a few years, before the university found itself in financial crisis again. Finally, Bronx Community College acquired a ready and decent campus, and it could suddenly provide education to thousands of Bronx students, who did not necessarily have too many other higher education options.

## NOTES

The author would like to thank the staff members of the New York University Archives.

<sup>1</sup>The position of NYU can be seen in Office of the President, President James M. Hester to the New York University Community, 20 March 1973, Administrative Papers of James McNaughton Hester, New York University Archives, (Hester Papers), Box 48, Folder 7 and Harry Berkowitz, "Heights Campus Sold for \$62 Million," *Washington Square Journal*, 20 March 1973, 1. The opinion of the state government can be seen in Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, "News Conference, re Higher Education," at Red Room, State Capitol, Albany, New York, 15 February 1972. The coverage of the media can be seen in Editorial, ". . . and New Hope for N.Y.U.," *The New York Times*, 21 February 1972, 26 and Francis X. Clines, "Assembly Approves Sale of N.Y.U. Bronx Campus," *The New York Times*, 11 May 1972, 39. The interpretation of the academic community can be seen in Earl F. Cheit, *The New Depression in Higher Education — Two Years Later* (Berkeley: Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973) and James J. Morriseau, "The Private Sector Revisited: N.Y.U. and P.I.N.Y.," *Planning for Higher Education* 2 (December 1973): 3-6.

<sup>2</sup>Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, From 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 265-93; Thomas J. Frusciano and Marilyn H. Pettit, *New York University and the City: An Illustrated History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 119-158.

<sup>3</sup>Frusciano and Pettit, *New York University and the City*, 163.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 179-216.

<sup>5</sup>Fred M. Hechinger, "N.Y.U. Cites Gain in Giving Up Hometown Aura to Secure National Image," *The New York Times*, 14 November 1965, 69; Sydney H. Schanberg, "N.Y.U. Is Upgrading Its Academic Requirements," *The New York Times*, 15 October 1967, 1; Ernest Bloch to James M. Hester, 1 June 1972, Hester Papers, Box 11, Folder 45; Barbara Radloff, "The Financial Woes of NYU," *Change* (October 1972): 15-18.

<sup>6</sup>Office of the President, "Notes on Meeting of President's Council of University College," 5 May 1966, Hester Papers, Box 58, Folder 2; Office of the President, "Memorandum from President Hester: University Policy for University College," 21 March 1967, Hester Papers, Box 18, Folder 6; Allan M. Cartter to Jay Oliva, 5 August 1968, Hester Papers, Box 18, Folder 6.

<sup>7</sup>Earl F. Cheit, *The New Depression in Higher Education: A Study of Financial Aid Conditions at 41 Colleges and Universities* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

<sup>8</sup>William W. Jellema, *The Red and the Black: Special Preliminary Report on the Financial Status, Present and Projected, of Private Institutions of Higher Learning* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges, 1971); William W. Jellema, ed., *Institutional Priorities and Management Objectives* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges, 1971); Hans H. Jenny and G. Richard Wynn, *The Golden Years: A Study of Income and Expenditure Growth and Distribution of 48 Private Four-Year Liberal Arts Colleges, 1960-1968* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1970).

<sup>9</sup>Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 210-8; Robert A. Stern, Thomas Mellins, and David Fishman, *New York 1960: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Second World War and the Bicentennial* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 228-42, 285-6, and 948-50; Frusciano and Pettit, *New York University and the City*, 202-16; "N.Y.U. Buys Fitch Hospital in Bronx for Use of Housing," *The New York Times*, 28 April 1965, 47.

<sup>10</sup>Schwartz, *The New York Approach*, 183-4 and 277-8; Frusciano and Pettit, *New York University and the City*, 202-3 and 213; James M. Hester to The Faculty, Students and Staff of New York University, "A New Stage in the University's Development," 2 May 1969, Hester Papers, Box 7, Folder 45.

<sup>11</sup>President James M. Hester to Members of the Faculty, Student Body, and Staff, "Review of University Finances and Establishment of A Commission on Effective Use of Resources," 5 December 1969, Hester Papers, Box 49, Folder 2; Ewald B. Nyquist to the Honorable Members of the Board of Regents, "New York University: A Major Private Institution in Trouble: A Report and Recommendations to the President of New York University," 10 November 1971; Hester Papers, Box 48, Folder 1; Radloff, "The Financial Woes of NYU," 16-17.

<sup>12</sup>Office of the President, James M. Hester to Members of the Board of Trustees, 15 April 1966, Hester Papers, Box 4, Folder 4; James M. Hester, "Memorandum to New York University Students: Tuition Increase for Next Year," 8 December 1966, Hester Papers, Box 7, Folder 45; Paul Buair Associates, Inc., "New York University — Its Most Crucial Hour," 9 November 1971, Hester Papers, Box 8, Folder 45; Ewald B. Nyquist to the Honorable Members of the Board of Regents, "New York University: A Major Private Institution in Trouble;" President James M. Hester, "The Present State of New York University," *Internal*, 21 September 1972; Deborah Sharpley, "New York University: Learning to Live with Red Ink," *Science* 178, (December 1972): 1072-5; Radloff, "The Financial Woes of NYU," 17; "How NYU Got Into Such A Financial Mess," *Business Week*, 1 July 1972, 32-4.

<sup>13</sup>John Sibley, "Albany Will Aid Private Schools," *The New York Times*, 25 May 1968, 20; Statement of Lester I. Brookner, Vice Chancellor for Administration, New York University to the Joint Legislative Committee on Higher Education, 7 October 1970, Hester Papers, Box 7, Folder 45; James M. Hester to the Members of the Board of Trustees, 16 April 1971, Box 8, Folder 45; "Universities in Crisis," *The Home News*, 21 February 1971; State Task Force on the Financing of Higher Education, *Report of the State Task Force on the Financing of Higher Education in New York State* (Albany: The State, 1972); Judson Hand, "Troubled Giant: NYU Is Losing the Money Battle," *Daily News*, 11 February 1972, 62.

<sup>14</sup>"Attacks Plan to Sell NYU Bronx Campus," *Daily News*, 22 February 1972.

<sup>15</sup>James M. Hester to the Honorable Bertram R. Gelfand, 1 March 1972, Hester Papers, Box 48, Folder 4.

<sup>16</sup>James M. Hester to Stuart Eckmann, *Heights Daily News*, 22 November 1967, Hester Papers, Box 16, Folder 7; "NYU Sets Study of West Bronx," *Bronx Press-Review*, 9 May 1968; S.T.B. to James M. Hester, 28 May 1969, Hester Papers, Box 58, Folder 2.

<sup>17</sup>New York City Planning Commission, *Plan for New York City, 1969: A Proposal. 2: The Bronx* (New York: City of New York, 1969), 66.

<sup>18</sup>Kermit C. Parsons, "A Truce in the War Between Universities and Cities: A Prologue to the Study of City-University Renewal," *The Journal of Higher Education* 34 (January 1963): 16-28; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 135-170; Themis Chronopoulos, "Disorderly Space: Power Relations and the Postwar Decline of New York City," (Providence: Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 2005), 19-74.

<sup>19</sup>James M. Hester, "The Urban University and the City," Remarks Before Town Hall Los Angeles, 12 July 1966, Hester Papers, Box 4, Folder 4; University College of Arts and Sciences, "The Metropolitan Leadership Program in the Liberal Arts," (October 1965), Hester Papers, Box 58, Folder 5; M. S. Handler, "N.Y.U. Opens Unit on Life in Cities," *The New York Times*, 11 March 1966, 26.

<sup>20</sup>Chauncey Downes to Dean Brooke Hindle, 28 November 1967, Hester Papers, Box 18, Folder 6; Brooke Hindle to James M. Hester, "The Liberal Arts in the University-City Relationship," 31 October 1967, Hester Papers, Box 18, Folder 6; University College, "NYU

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<sup>21</sup>Bernard Weinraub, "Once-Grand Concourse: The Avenue, a Symbol of Prosperity, Has Grown Old and Causes Concern," *The New York Times*, 2 February 1965, 40; Constance Rosenblum, *Boulevard of Dreams: Heady Times, Heartbreak, and Hope Along the Grand Concourse in The Bronx* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup>Weinraub, "Once-Grand Concourse," 40; American Jewish Congress, *The Grand Concourse: Promise and Challenge* (New York: Commission on Community Interrelations, 1967), 8.

<sup>23</sup>Steven V. Roberts, "Grand Concourse: Hub of The Bronx is Undergoing Ethnic Changes; Nearby Slums Encroach on Old Prestigious Area; City Seeking to Halt the Flight of Whites from the Section," *The New York Times*, 21 July 1966, sec. 2, p.1, 39; Abel Silver, "City Fights White Exodus from Grand Concourse," *New York Post*, 9 March 1967.

<sup>24</sup>American Jewish Congress, *The Grand Concourse*, 5-6, 10.

<sup>25</sup>Bronx Office Department of City Planning, *Concourse Action Program* (New York: Office of Bronx Borough President, 1968); "Malls on Concourse Will Be Repaired Soon," *Bronx Press Review*, 13 July 1967, 1; "Changes Urged to End Deterioration in The Bronx," *The New York Times*, 21 November 1967; "Concourse Rehabilitation Report Spurs Planning," *Bronx Press Review*, 23 November 1967, 1; "Concourse E. Code Office 'Failure' Hit," *Bronx Press Review*, 13 June 1968, 1; Office of the Mayor, "Press Release," 24 July 1968; Alfred E. Clark, "Concourse Area Gets Face-Lifting," *The New York Times*, 28 July 1968; "Concourse Uplift: Cash, Land Given," *Bronx Press Review*, 10 October 1968, 1; John V. Lindsay, Mayor, "Address Before 'A Better Concourse, Inc.' At Temple Adath Israel," 4 August 1969.

<sup>26</sup>Fires in the South Bronx became even more frequent after 1973. "Suspicious Fire Damages Hebrew School in Bronx," *The New York Times*, 26 November 1968, 95; Martin Tolchin, "Synagogue Vigil Vowed by Mayor," *The New York Times*, 27 November 1968, 48; Peter Millones, "Fire Damages N.Y.U.'s Library," *The New York Times*, 18 April 1969, 29; Thomas F. Brady, "2d Blaze at N.Y.U. Set by Arsonists," *The New York Times*, 26 April 1969, 1; David A. Andelman, "Crime on the Campus Spreading Fear," *The New York Times*, 19 April 1971, 39; Robert Nacron, "Bronx Campus Put Up for Sale; Hester Awaiting State Bid, But Legal Snag Perils; Set UC Move," *Heights Daily News*, 17 February 1972, 1; "N.Y.U. Finds Drop in Its Applicants," *The New York Times*, 9 April 1972, 70; Peter Derrick, "University Heights," in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1216-7.

<sup>27</sup>Office of the President, James M. Hester to Members of the New York University community, 16 February 1972, Hester Papers, Box 9, Folder 45; "Agreement Between New York University and James D. Landauner Associates, Inc.," 23 June 1972, Hester Papers, Box 48, Folder 6; "Merger Agreement Between NYU/SES and PIB," 21 March 1973, Hester Papers, Box 48, Folder 7; New York University News Bureau, "For Release," 19 March 1973, Hester Papers, Box 48, Folder 7.

<sup>28</sup>William P. Kuczewicz, "Community Braces for Impact of NYU Exodus," *The Heights News*, 9 May 1973, 1, 8.