

LINDA – Fieldnotes –February 8, 2007

Subject: Columbia University Open House  
Location: Alfred Lerner Hall, Roone Arledge Auditorium  
Time: 10:45am-12:30pm

From CU events calendar:

Manhattanville Open House

**Date:** February 08, 2007 from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm EST

**Location:** Columbia University  
Morningside Campus  
Alfred Lerner Hall, Roone Arledge Auditorium

**Contact:** For further information regarding this event, please contact Office of Communications and Public Affairs by sending email to [pubaff@columbia.edu](mailto:pubaff@columbia.edu).

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Columbia University is hosting an open house for faculty, staff and students interested in learning more about Columbia's proposed expansion into the old manufacturing area of Manhattanville in West Harlem.

Stop by Lerner Auditorium on Thursday, February 8th between 10:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. to see the proposal, ask questions and learn more about the project.

Refreshments will be served.

To learn more, please contact Communications and Public Affairs at [pubaff@columbia.edu](mailto:pubaff@columbia.edu) or call 854-5573.

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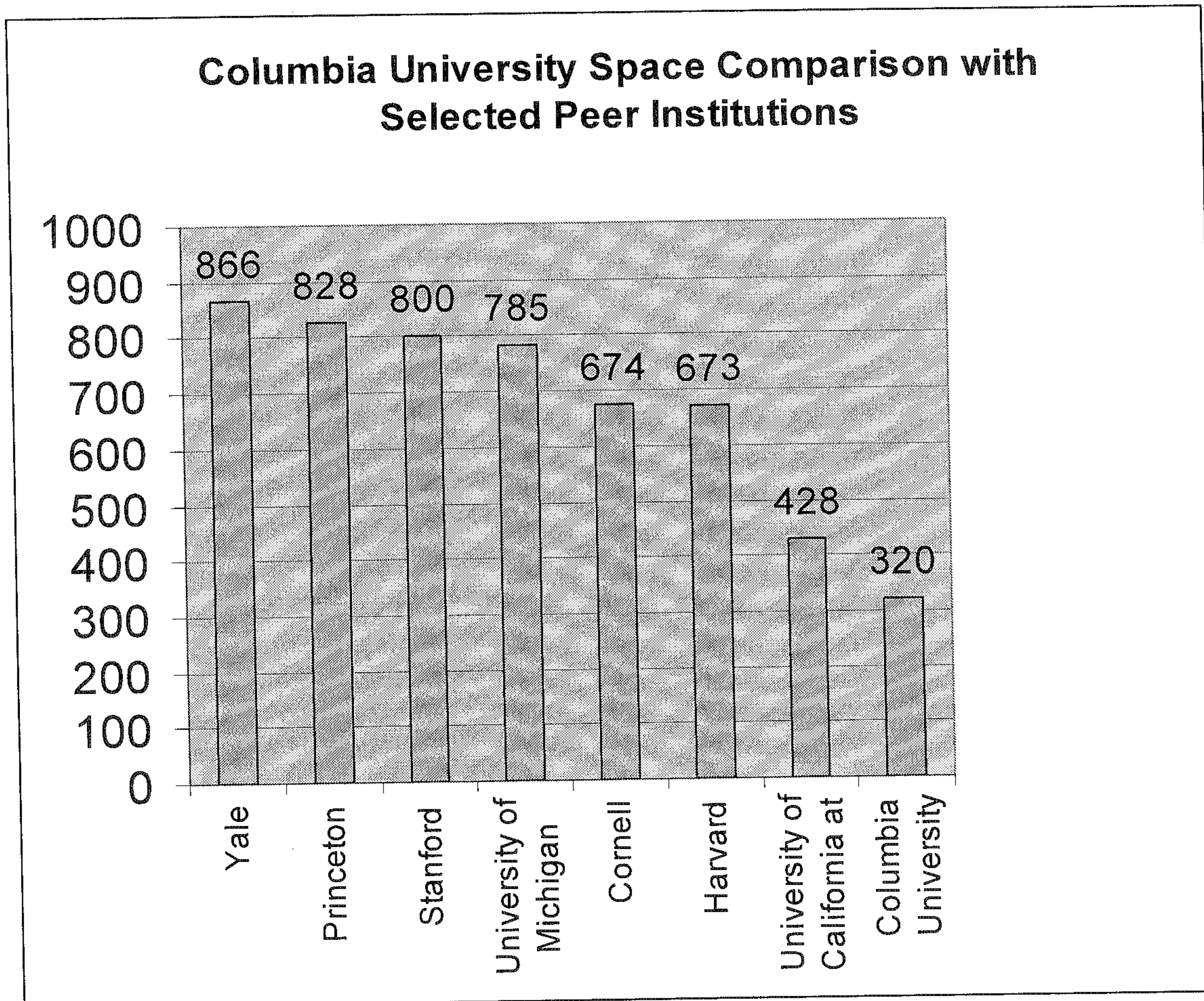
After finding Alfred Lerner Hall on a campus map, I entered the building from the campus side (versus the street entrance). The building, which houses the bookstore in the basement, looks quite modern, with a wall of windows on the north side.

The campus entrance has a security guard who directed me to go through the handicap gate, and to the left. Students entering the building used their cards to get through a turnstile. After walking down a ramp, there is a large foyer area in front of the auditorium. A young white woman wearing slacks and a sweater sat at a table stocked with blue sign-in sheets and some literature. Next to her a TV on a stand played a video, presumably of the proposed Manhattanville expansion. She cheerily informed me that I could sign in, but I didn't need to. I did not.

The large auditorium appeared quite new, or at least well-maintained, brightly lit with off-white walls and shining cream floors. Immediately to the left, there is another general information table with another fresh-faced young white woman. I asked her if this event was just for “Columbia people” and she affirmed this, explaining that they would have other events for “the community.” She said something like, we haven’t had one for Columbia people for awhile.

As I looked over the literature on her table, she implied that a brochure labeled “Planning Update” would be informative. [Later review revealed it to be more of an advertisement reassuring (or attempting to persuade) the reader that the expansion will create jobs for local people and so on.] She also showed me some photocopies of articles that explain the benefits the expansion will offer. I took copies of everything available on the table, including the card of La Verna Fountain, the Assistance Vice President for Public Affairs, who I would meet next. This table also had a set of blue sign-in sheets and feedback cards.

Next I came across a chart and two maps. The chart was quite striking, portraying Columbia as lagging far behind its peers in terms of space. Here is a rough reproduction:



The chart included only the Morningside campus, which presumably does not include TC and other professional schools outside the Morningside campus.

Before I could finish copying the chart (I'm not quite sure what the y-axis values are), a middle-aged, light-skinned black woman engaged me in conversation. She wore grey slacks and a loose-fitting deconstructed black jacket over a red blouse. I asked her if this chart was reproduced in any of the literature, gesturing toward the table I had just left. I told her that the chart was striking, that you could really see that Columbia needed space. She responded that the chart was not in any of the literature, but she would send me the chart over email. She told me that all the other universities listed were also engaged in expansions. Her name tag read La-Verna Fountain.

Next to the chart were two maps depicting the expansion. On the back of these maps read, "Approved as of 2-08-06." A middle-aged man who looked East Asian, wearing jeans, an athletic jacket that looked a bit heavier than a nylon windbreaker, and a baseball cap, asked about the school. He had a child going into sixth grade the next year and wanted to know if there would be a space for his child. La-Verna Fountain gave him someone's name.

Next, there were four tables set together, covered in white tablecloths, and loaded with beverages and food. When I arrived, around 10:45, this included small water bottles (half pint), bottles of orange and cranberry juice, large stainless steel containers of coffee and hot water, trays of pastries and bagels, plastic knives, cups, and plenty of condiments: cream cheese, a beautiful display of multiple kinds of jams and jellies, lemon, creamer, and presumably, sugar. A white-jacketed caterer stood nearby. He directed people towards the trash cans, and later, would replace trays of pastries with trays of hummus and pita bread, couscous salad, grape-leaf dolma, chips, and a dip layered with what looked like beans, salsa, and sour cream.

I took some food and sat along a row of chairs placed behind the catering tables, where two young women were sitting with food and talking together, another intently reading what looked like a newspaper. I mentioned to her that I had been to a community meeting on Tuesday that this was much different. "Really different," she agreed, and went back to reading. When she unfolded the newspaper I saw that I had seen it online, the *West Harlem Herald*. "Where did you get that?" I asked. "I saw it online." She gestured to her left. "From that table." I mentioned that the paper seemed ambivalent about the expansion, and she agreed without saying anything. After finishing my food I got up and went to the table with the newsletters.

Two white women manned this table, labeled Plan 197-a. A thin young woman was standing, and a middle-aged woman was sitting behind the table. Literature on the table included items found on the first table, also in Spanish, and two copies of the 197-a plan. I asked the woman who was standing if I could download the plan somewhere. She handed me a printout from the Pratt Center for Community Development website, which included a small icon for downloading the plan. The newsletter, she explained, was published by Community Board 9. [My initial response to this table and this literature

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was that Columbia was “co-opting” CB9 by presenting Plan 197-a and their newsletter without any representatives from CB9 or anyone who worked on or advocate for Plan 197-a as opposed to Columbia’s plan.]

She explained to me that Plan 197-a was “the community plan,” and Plan 197-c was “the Columbia plan.” She mentioned that Columbia was in negotiation with the Local Development Corporation as we spoke. [I am learning this lingo fast; I think she may have explained the LDC as formed by the Community Board, but now that I know the acronyms it’s hard to remember.] She seemed to try very hard to convince me that Columbia was doing all it could to work with the community. I asked about eminent domain after she showed me a map outlining which areas Columbia already owned and which areas Columbia wanted for mixed-use development using the ULURP process, which she explained was for rezoning those areas. We talked briefly about the need for more lab space, particularly in recruiting star faculty, that they wouldn’t come without adequate lab space. [I didn’t realize at the time that the editorial by Bollinger had said exactly this.]

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During our conversation a young white man with mussed hair and a denim messenger bag strapped across his chest interrupted us. He wanted to hand us flyers that gave another perspective [can’t remember the exact wording, he would later explain it as student and community perspective]. They got into a brief argument, I think after he said that this was a PR event [or stunt?], misrepresenting the 197-a. She invoked her office [I can’t remember what it was] and said something sharply back. I asked him for a flyer and myself said very pointedly that we were talking, implying that he had been rude by interrupting us. He withdrew after handing me a flyer, muttering something I can’t remember. She apologized, and we continued our conversation.

Eventually she told me that “we” [Columbia employees?] couldn’t say much since everything was still “in process.” Seeming refer to the young man who just interrupted us, she also implied that saying too much would open Columbia to trouble. She also explained eminent domain to me, that Columbia was using it on city land. I told her that I was under the impression that Columbia was using eminent domain to drive out residents on private property, implying relief that they were not. She also explained several times that building underground would allow for delivery and trash services not to clog the streets with traffic. [I got the sense that she was defending against charges I did not know how to make yet.] At some point, I don’t remember when, she mentioned that some of “our” favorite restaurants were in the expansion area, that the expansion would not affect them. She also said, under her breath, that the holdouts in the area were landlords who want to develop condos [presumably, as opposed to embattled poor tenants]. At the end of our conversation, which I had already unsuccessfully tried to end by thanking her, she handed me her card. It read, Orit Darwish, Project Coordinator, Office of Government and Community Affairs.

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The next table was the ULURP process. Two black men and a black woman sat behind this table. One man’s skin was mocha, the other’s even lighter with light eyes. The woman was about a cinnamon color. The very light-skinned man explained when I

stumbled over ULURP that this was not affiliated with the Community Board or 197-a, instead a process of rezoning with the city. I picked up a “fact sheet” on the ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Procedure).

Next I visited the Studebaker and Nash table, which apparently showcased two of the buildings recently made ready for particular Columbia departments to move in, including IT and others. I looked at old photos of the buildings, one of which apparently used to process milk. A white man in a suit standing behind the table told me to let him know if I had any questions. Two women asked him if he had a floor plan, and he invited them to “come on back,” where a series of charts on stands depicted the outside of the buildings and floor plans. This table included a glossy flyer on “Neighborhood Attractions for Studebaker and Nash staff” [which made me wonder if some people were unhappy at the prospect of being moved to West Harlem on 125<sup>th</sup> Street before the area was completely gentrified.] Another flyer listed restaurants in Manhattanville, their location, cuisine, average cost, and service type (casual dining, fast food w/seating, elegant dining). Two menus were on the table, printouts from the menupages website, one of the Floridita [I can’t remember the other one, did not pick it up.]

Two other women, middle-aged and heavysset, approached the maps and began talking about them. A white man approached them from behind and asked if one of them had “put the numbers” on the map. She disagreed and indicated that she had done something else [can’t remember]. [These women were notable in that they appeared “Latino” in terms of appearance and speech; most people attending this event were white, young, and looked like students, and most of the black people were manning tables.]

The next table, “Job and Career Path,” had a flow chart next to the table. The flow chart depicted what a community person might do to get a job at Columbia. If they did not pass muster, they could be referred for services, then reapply. [For some reason I did not pick up the flyers at this table, perhaps because I felt it was not targeted for me.] Nobody was manning this table at the time.

The next table was labeled Research and Safety. A woman with dark-chocolate skin sat behind this table. A young white man wearing a sport coat came up at the same time as me, tried to joke with her, and eventually moved behind the table. As I looked at their display, an older white man in a blazer and tie also came behind the table. [Not sure if in response to my lingering at the table?] The display gave me the impression of answering charges of biohazards. I asked what the worries about safety were. The older white man told me that people were afraid of the new. “A poet,” for example, might hear the word “laboratory” and think “flasks” with strange liquids in them. I asked if they had to do a lot of education around what basic science and research are, and he said no. He said they did “outreach,” such as this event, to tell people that the same safety procedures would be instituted at the Manhattanville campus. Before he left he asked if I wanted a comment card (next to the ubiquitous sign-in sheets) and I refused, saying they were on every table. “I have to ask,” he told me.

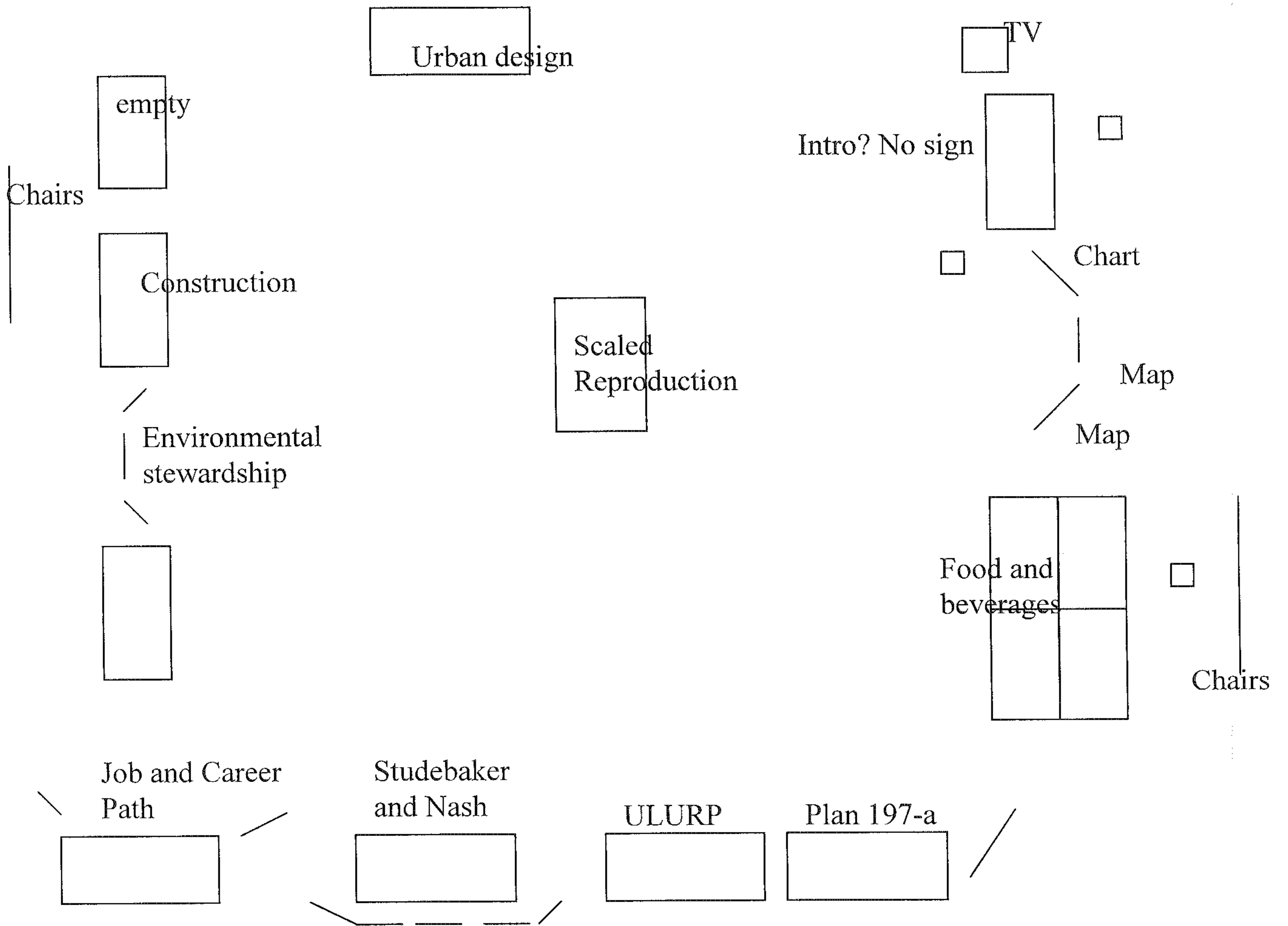
The next display was Environmental Stewardship, which showed some pictures of buildings and text. I didn't pay attention to this.

A tall white man in a suit held down the "Construction" table, to which I also did not pay attention.

An empty table.

The last table was "Urban design," with drawings of people walking around a mixed-use area.

In the middle was a scaled reproduction, presumably of the proposed expansion, complete with miniature trees. [I didn't really know what I was looking at.]



I returned to the chart and maps station where I met La-Verna, where the young activist student was holding forth and handing out more flyers. His audience included a short, middle-aged white woman and a black woman asking critical questions of the expansion, some young people who looked like students (at least one of whom knew the speaker), and La-Verna hovering in the background. The two middle-aged women, who lived in the neighborhood, were particularly concerned with affordable housing and with the history between Columbia and local residents (the Morningside Park proposed gym). The young man, whose name was Rowan, was explaining that the LDC meetings did not allow public comment. The middle-aged white woman asked what the LDC was [again, I already know this lingo], and he laughed embarrassedly and apologized for using about acronyms. He explained that the 179-a plan was developed by the Community District 9 and that the Local Development Corporation was negotiating with Columbia. The problem was that Columbia did not seem to be up front about what it was planning and avoided making commitments to affordable housing and other issues built into the 179-a plan. Also, he claimed, it was feared that the LDC was in Councilman Jackson's pocket [I might have gotten this name wrong]. People asked him questions, including who he represented, and he explained about "student and community voices." La-Verna hovered just behind us (I was standing next to him, with my back to the maps.)

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Eventually La-Verna stepped in to ask him to get his facts straight and they went back and forth. La-Verna involved a white man in a suit to answer some questions, and under some intense questioning he squirmed, smiled, and protested that he had just stopped by, implying that he was not obliged to answer tough questions. A small crowd grew, to twelve then fifteen then more. At some point La-Verna got involved in the conversation, and the suited guy slipped out of the circle. A young woman with copper-colored skin asked Rowan a question as La-Verna addressed another person, and a smaller circle re-formed around Rowan.

The copper-skinned woman left, and the young white female students clustered around Rowan. One asked him if he saw her waving from her bike. I took this opportunity to get more food, as the caterer had recently set out hummus and lunch-type foods.

After eating I saw that the cluster around Rowan had broken up, and he moved to the center of the room, where a cluster of people stood around the scaled reproduction. He did not engage anyone in conversation so I went over and asked him about the relationship between CB9 and the LDC. I told him I had gone to the meeting. He reiterated that people were particularly wary since the LDC included people from political offices. I told him they had just added another board member on Tuesday, from a political office. At this point the middle-aged woman also came over and thanked him for being a "rabblrouser." He smiled. She reiterated her concern with affordable housing. They discussed La-Verna as being "really good" at evading questions, and how she kept referring us to other people who could not answer questions because they did not know the answers. The woman asked Rowan if he thought they knew what was going on, and he replied, "Somebody knows." He explained how somebody accused him of calling an administrator a liar. She asked if he had gotten to talk to administrators one-on-one, and he told stories of previous encounters, including a panel discussion with Tom DeMott

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[tenant activist at the LDC meeting], another tenant activist, “Ms. Fountain,” and someone else. Someone wanted to make a documentary and had brought their camera. Because IDC [can’t remember what this stands for] valued “safe space,” they asked if everyone felt comfortable. Then, Ms. Fountain, in her institutional capacity, said she felt uncomfortable. [I assume this means the cameras had to be turned off.] If he knew she was an administrator, Rowan claimed, “I would’ve called her out.”

I left shortly afterwards to prepare for the interview with Pastor Grattan.

[Huge contrast to the LDC meeting. This gave every impression of being “open,” in fact was called an “open house,” with plenty of staff members to answer questions and offer literature. Also, very posh, with the beautiful setting, catered food, service, so forth. But very pro-expansion, with little or no mention of controversy except in response to direct questions or in what seemed like a defensive and scripted offering of information not asked (e.g. the multiple reassurances that CU was “listening to the community”). Tone of unquestioned benefit to CU, and thus to everyone in room. Implication that you’d be crazy to think this expansion could be a bad thing, that CU wasn’t doing everything in their power to address community concerns. Sense of activist and “community” people as bringing up “irrelevant” or “illegitimate” concerns (affordable housing, de facto eviction, cost of living increases, who benefits and who suffers, who gets to stay, pushing out “bodegas”), rendering them deviant in this space.]