EAST HARLEM COMMUNITY DESIGN WORKSHOP

A Report of the
East Harlem Community Link Initiative

This Workshop was made possible through the generous support of the Ford Foundation and the sponsorship of Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, City Council Member Philip Reed and Community Board 11.
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This Workshop was made possible through the generous support of the Ford Foundation and the sponsorship of Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, City Council Member Philip Reed and Community Board 11. We would like to thank specially Rick Muller and Carlos Rodriguez at Manhattan’s Borough President Office, Delfina Cruz and Aaron Lowenstein at Council Member Philip Reed’s Office, and Javier Llano and Norma Ojeda at Community Board 11.

The report was written and researched by Nicolas Ronderos, Associate Planner at RPA, under the direction of Chris Jones, Director of Economic Programs. Rob Lane, Director of Design Programs, designed and directed the workshop. Toya Williford coordinated outreach and workshop logistics as Manager of Community Development Projects.

We would also like to thank Laura Vialva and North General Hospital for hosting the East Harlem Community Design Workshop on May 18, 2002, as well as The Asthma Moms of East Harlem who provided their catering services for the event. Also we extend our gratitude to the persons that helped facilitate the discussions that day; Rob Pirani of RPA, Claire Weisz of Claire Weisz Architects, Colin Carthcart of Kiss + Cathcart Architects, Paul Milana and A. James Tinson of Cooper Robertson and Partners, and Christopher Stienon and Neil Kittredge of Beyer Blinder Belle.
1. Purpose and Background for the Workshop

On May 18th, 2002 at North General Hospital in East Harlem, 50 residents of the neighborhood led a team of urban designers and Regional Plan Association staff in a visioning session on the future of the community with a subway line along Second Avenue. The goals of the Workshop were to envision East Harlem with the Second Avenue subway by identifying potential improvements near proposed subway stations, creating visual images, and presenting ideas to each other, public officials and city agencies.

Sponsored by Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, City Council Member Philip Reed and Community Board 11 Chair David Givens, the East Harlem Community Design Workshop brought together residents of East Harlem to discuss desired uses and activities around proposed stations of the Second Avenue Subway. The event is part of the ongoing research, advocacy and technical assistance efforts of Regional Plan Association for the Second Avenue Subway.

Regional Plan Association, with support from the Ford Foundation, has been working with the East Harlem community to design and implement a strategy to maximize the benefits of the proposed Second Avenue Subway for community residents and businesses. Initial funding for a full-length Second Avenue Subway is included in the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s (MTA) 2000-2004 capital program and intense planning efforts are expected during the next several years, with construction slated to begin in 2004. To insure that East Harlem fully benefits from this new service, the community needs both to be involved in planning for the project and to forge economic
development, housing and environmental strategies that takes advantage of new links to the regional economy.

East Harlem is the area that extends north of 96th Street up to 142nd Street and East of Fifth Avenue to the Harlem River, including Randall and Ward Islands. Proposed stations of the Second Avenue Subway in the area are located at 96th, 106th and 116th and Second Avenue, and at 125th between Lexington and Park Avenues.
The upside potential of the new transit service—drastically reduced travel times to regional employment markets, new development and business opportunities, and rising community incomes and property values—literally offers a once-in-a-century opportunity. However, these changes must be managed to insure that low-income
residents and existing small businesses that may not be prepared to take advantage of these prospects benefit as fully as possible.

Prior to the Workshop, RPA has advanced an agenda that has built capacity and awareness of the issues at stake with the Second Avenue Subway in East Harlem. Actions completed to date include the following:

• A needs assessment that included interviews and ongoing discussions with 20 community leaders and stakeholders and public officials, analysis of previous community-based plans and review of reports and articles on recent developments and issues in East Harlem that led to a public forum on December 3, 2001 that obtained input from community residents.

• Technical analysis that included ongoing review of MTA’s plans for the Second Avenue Subway, analyses of recent demographic and land use trends, assessment of the labor market trends and opportunities, analysis of potential time savings to different job centers, as well as Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis of land use and transportation, and survey of potential development sites.

The community design workshop was convened as part of the outreach efforts of the project. This document reports on the outcomes of the discussion groups that convened for each proposed station and summarizes the ideas from the workshop that were presented to the Community Board on June 18th, 2002.
Since the completion of the workshop, continued planning for the Second Avenue Subway and East Harlem by government and private organizations provide new information that will need to be incorporated in working group findings. Specifically:

- The MTA released its Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS) for the Second Avenue Subway and held public hearings in May 2003.

- The New York City Planning Commission approved a major rezoning proposal for East Harlem in May 2003.

- Columbia University’s Urban Technical Assistance Project (UTAP) is completing a planning assessment of East Harlem for Community Board 11.
2. Workshop Approach and Method

A community design workshop is a planning tool used widely to address a very specific issue or a plan for a small area within a community. The advantage of a community design workshop is that it can visualize proposals in a short period of time with broad public input. They do not substitute for broader outreach or more comprehensive planning but can be an important complement to community planning efforts.

In order to facilitate the workshop discussion, RPA reviewed prior plans and prepared an analysis of existing conditions. The areas around the proposed Second Avenue Subway stations were surveyed to develop an inventory of buildings and sites in these locations. The inventory was reviewed and assessed in two walking tours of the areas with input from residents and city officials. This research was presented in the design workshop as background material during the event, where ideas on the future of the neighborhood were discussed by the community.

For each proposed station the area within 600 ft. (approximately two blocks) of the proposed stations locations was surveyed. In the planning literature, 600 ft. is often considered an easy walking distance from a transit stop and the area where the most concentrated new development is likely to take place. The Land Use Field Survey followed principles of urban research established by The American Planning Association¹, looking at the basic uses and activities in the buildings surrounding the stops of the Subway Line and inventorying them according to these topics:

Site Development: Overall Physical Development Character of the Land.
Activity: Actual Use of Land based on Observable Characteristics
Function: Economic Function or Type of Establishment
Condition: Visual Appearance of the Structure
Use: Utilization of the Whole Structure or Part of It.

The results of the Land Use Field Survey were summarized and recorded in geographical form giving way to the identification of the overall characteristics of the station areas of the Second Avenue Subway in East Harlem. These maps were presented to the East Harlem community in the walking tours and at the design workshop to support the dialogue.

The workshop opened with a brief presentation of characteristics of the areas around planned station locations at 106th Street and Second Avenue, 116th Street and Second Avenue and 125th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues. Three groups gathered to discuss ideas for the betterment of each area. Each group was guided by a facilitator and supported by an architect who gave visual form to the ideas. The discussions of each table were documented in maps and written notes. The results were presented at the end of the day to the whole group, giving an opportunity for participants to contribute to other station discussions.

2 The area around 96th St. and Second Avenue was considered after analysis and field surveying to be an established institutional center (with 26 structures, 100% developed, predominantly institutional and residential with 100% structures in good condition and utilized) and was not a focus of the workshop.
3. Station Area Proposals and Discussions

Workshop outcomes included ideas, proposals and maps and drawings that represented concepts developed by the participants. The discussion bellow describes each station area and the ideas and proposals of each discussion group. In summary, 106th Street is envisioned as a neighborhood-scale station area, while 116th Street is seen as the community’s commercial hub and 125th Street as a regional hub linking several transit lines.

Area Around Proposed Station at 106th Street and 2nd Avenue

The area within 600 ft. of 106th St. and Second Avenue is predominantly residential and mixed-use in character with 89 structures in place. North of 106th Street lies the Franklin Plaza residential towers and their grounds. The sites within 2 blocks of the proposed station are developed and only 6% of them are vacant. Most buildings are 3-4 story apartment buildings in good condition and fully used with commercial activities in the first story. However 10% of the buildings are underutilized, in that they are not fully occupied. The overall conclusion of the table that discussed the station at 106th is that new transit services to this area should reinforce its residential character, neighborhood scale, and supporting commercial and public uses.

Several issues were priority considerations for the group. These included the need to preserve and expand affordable housing, the importance of open space and parks, the importance of access to job opportunities and the desire for community ownership of the area. These factors led to the underlying idea: that of consolidating a revitalized neighborhood scale district supported by the new station. The sense of community and
the low rise character of the housing in and around 106 and Second Avenue are essential in this respect.

![View of 105th Street and Second Avenue Northwest Corner](image)

The future of these blocks relies on the possibility of improving and integrating neighborhood assets. The vitality of local shops and residential buildings is a clear example of the neighborhood resources that should provide a foundation for future development. The challenge here is to introduce subway related improvements that connect these while supporting quality of life and economic improvements for residents. In this sense four key themes were identified in the workshop:

- Make 2nd Ave. a unified, neighborhood scale mixed-use corridor
• Reinforce 3rd Ave. as a central shopping corridor
• Keep 1st Ave. residential and foster low-income housing
• Improve Bus Connections (Cross-town and for Job Access)

With these themes in mind the existing uses along Second Avenue from 114th to 118th would be strengthened, consolidating the strip as a mixed-use corridor in the community district. This will entail the retention and attraction of uses in the area that would serve both housing and commercial needs of residents. To the east of the area First Avenue should be kept residential in character guarantying its use as a low to middle income housing sector in the context of the district. West of Second Avenue, the uses should be more commercial in scope, strengthening Third Avenue as a busy shopping strip that supports and reinforces the mix-used activities and residential uses on the parallel avenues.
Ideas for this area include earmarking of Empowerment Zone loans to residential and commercial development around 106th Street and Second Avenue and creation of job opportunities for immigrants both Downtown and in the community. Specific proposals are the unification of business appearances and the streetscape by upgrading street facades, establishing a more uniform character for the area and providing benches, paving and plantings that upgrade and strengthen the corridor. There was also clear opposition to the location of a bus depot in the area.
The station design was proposed to have small, airy, and distinctive entrances and include elevators and escalators and a live token booth. Entrances to the subway were proposed at 2nd Avenue and 106th in the Northwest, Northeast and Southwest corners of the intersection. Of these, an entrance on the Northwest corner was given the highest priority. There was also strong support for entrances on both sides of Second Avenue and an entrance at 108th Street and Second Avenue. Some support was also expressed for an entrance on the Northwest corner of 105th and Second Avenue.

**Area around Proposed Station at 116th Street and 2nd Avenue**

Around 116th Street there are 164 buildings within the area 600 ft. from the crossroad at 2nd Avenue. The place is predominantly developed with residential and mixed commercial and residential activities. These buildings are mostly mid-rise apartments in good condition and utilized, generally with first story commercial activities and residential uses on the upper floors. This area of Community Board 11 is a key node in the 116th Street corridor, where the community finds the center of its commercial activities. The link to the region established by the Second Avenue Subway should be one that supports and enhances this vibrancy, particularly the commercial character of the area extending east and west along 116th and mixed-uses north and south on 2nd Avenue.

Issues of importance to the group that discussed the area around 116th and Second Avenue included job accessibility opportunities opened by the Second Avenue Subway. Other issues considered were traffic impacts that the development of East River Plaza to the east would have on the area, and the need for management of the likely increase in car and truck traffic that the development would bring. Other issues were the existence
of few development sites around the area given the scarce number of vacant lots and the constraints for development this entailed, and the shortage of affordable housing for local residents in the area.

With these factors under consideration, 116th Street and Second Avenue was envisioned as a local commercial hub, with the idea of revitalizing it as a destination for the whole of East Harlem. The scale of the area was highlighted as a key aspect to strengthen through proposals that contributed to its revitalization within its existing context of uses.

The existing retail uses, largely small businesses, as well as the residential activities in and around 116th Street were identified as assets that would support the redevelopment of the area. The challenge is here to accommodate desired growth at the local scale.
leveraging the potential of development of the Second Avenue Subway. Themes that supported this vision were identified in the workshop:

- Make 116th Street a consolidated commercial corridor that extends from Third Avenue to the East River.
- Improve amenities along the 116th street commercial corridor.
- Promote mixed uses on Second Avenue from 115th to 119th.

These themes support the vision for a reinvigorated commercial corridor on 116th from the East River to Third Avenue. Traffic minimization and management related to the East River Plaza development is essential to the future of the area, as well as streetscape beautification of the corridor with street plantings, street furniture and unified facades for businesses. In this respect the 116th strip would work as a catalyst for activities for the whole of East Harlem and support housing and other uses appropriate of a local scale commercial corridor, especially on Second Avenue, north of 116th Street.
Map showing the proposals of the surrounding area around 116th and Second Avenue

Ideas for this area include construction of a Movie Theater that would serve residents in Community District 11 and make the area a recreation destination. Other ideas were to entice affordable housing for people who work in the neighborhood and attract and retain small retail and service businesses.

Specific proposals for the station design were the need of entrances on all four corners of 116th Street and Second Avenue to support it as the eastern hub of the commercial corridor. This, and the provision of elevators and escalators, would also ease access for senior residents. Many seniors live to the north of the area, and additional entrances at
the Northwest and Southeast corners of 118th Street and Second Avenue were given a very high priority by workshop participants. This was reinforced by the need to serve the northeast corner of East Harlem, which would still be without convenient subway service as the subway curves westward north of the station.

Diagram showing the station design and adjacent uses for the 116th Station

**Area around Proposed Station at 125th Street and Lexington Avenue**

125th St. and Lexington Avenue is an area with 102 structures, with a large presence of mixed-use and transportation activities of varying scales. Much of the area is in disrepair but newer, large-scale commercial development, especially near Lexington Avenue and
125th Street, add to its vibrancy. Light industrial uses along Madison Avenue are also important as job generators and support services. The rest of the area is residential, much of it poor in quality. Almost half of the buildings are in fair or poor condition, with 97 structures developed and 5 vacant sites. Of the former, 23 buildings are underutilized having vacant storefronts or upper stories. The conclusion of the group that discussed this area is that it should be leveraged as a regional gateway by strengthening its city-wide commercial character and making it an attraction that fits its neighborhood context.

Issues raised by this group were the likely impacts of proposed retail uses, existing traffic congestion and general neglect of the area. It was observed that East 125th hasn’t been impacted as positively by the transformation of the corridor as has Central and West Harlem. Nevertheless, congestion as a result of visitors to Pathmark on 125th and Lexington and other proposed retail uses raised concerns over the adequate traffic capacity of the area. The present traffic on 124th and Lexington was also pointed to as an issue of concern.
Perceived abandonment around Madison Avenue and 125th Street and presence of a methadone clinic in the surroundings constitute other issues of relevance. The mix of industrial activities and presence of the MetroNorth infrastructure on Madison are salient characteristics of this area that contribute to the sense of neglect. In this respect the need to attract people and make full use of amenities such as Marcus Garvey Park to the Southwest are imperative. The scarce presence of other amenities and uses attractive to families were also mentioned as issues to overcome in the environs of this planned subway station.

The future of this area in the center of Upper Manhattan, where many different people and the history of the community converge, relies on the vision for it as an efficient and attractive transit connection. Preservation of the low rise appearance of buildings and a people-oriented approach that uses quality architecture was proposed to support this
station area as a gateway to the neighborhood. The challenge here is how to articulate this regional link in the midst of the commercial corridor of Harlem. A strong balance between high volumes of traffic and the rest of the neighborhood should be achieved.

The following key themes were identified in the workshop to accomplish this vision:

- Make the station a Harlem Gateway envisioned as TRI-MECCA, a multicultural regional stop and transit node.
- Constitute the area as a recreational and commercial destination that is welcoming and human-scale and attracts creative uses (not Big Box).

These themes will underscore the desire to consolidate the node as a commercial and recreational hub that replicates the developments of the 125th corridor extending to the West. This implies attracting retail and attractions to replace some of the industrial uses prevalent in the area today without loosing the identity of the neighborhood. In this respect both the node and the commercial strip of 125th are essential components of the vision for the area. For the node, an architectural statement should be put in place that constitutes it as a gateway to Uptown Manhattan, Harlem and East Harlem specifically. For the corridor, commercial uses should balance regional attractions, respect for the neighborhood’s scale, and support activities for residents of the surrounding areas.
Specific proposals for the area are to support family activities and bring various youth groups together especially strengthening links to the high schools in the surroundings. In this respect, youth training at Marcus Garvey Park should help form a coalition with youth to foster the recreational and educational activities in the node. Attraction of small scale shops and investments in quality of life should follow improving and unifying the streetscape on 125th. Given the regional nature of this transit stop, a grand and welcoming architectural statement should be incorporated to the station entrance, and street management and signaling should be upgraded. Parking at Pathmark to relieve congestion was also proposed.
Diagram showing the station design and adjacent uses for the 125th Station
4. Potential to Implement

The ideas in this report can be a catalyst for station area development that can help realize the community’s collective vision. They require additional vetting with others in East Harlem, considerable feasibility analysis, and discussions with the MTA, City Planning and other agencies. This should ideally take place in the context of community outreach and planning by the MTA, and in the refinement and implementation of community-based plans for the entire district. Implementation will also require a focused commitment of East Harlem’s political, business and civic leaders, and adequate technical and financial support from government agencies.

RPA has studied several of the implementation issues related to the proposals suggested by East Harlem residents in the Community Design Workshop. In particular, it assessed the current and proposed zoning, site assemblage and ownership considerations in the station areas. The research did not include a market assessment or technical feasibility analysis. In general, the research indicates that the proposed zoning supports the type of development that was envisioned at the workshop, but that assemblage and ownership issues could make it difficult to achieve some of the specific recommendations. Conditions in specific areas are shown below. In addition, some of the larger recommendations, especially those related to the need to expand affordable housing and improve job training and job access, require actions that go well beyond the physical development of the station areas.
Overall the area allows for the kind of uses suggested by the Community Design Workshop. Specifically, the suggestions of the workshop relate to the current and proposed zoning in Community Board 11 as follows: The proposal to make 2\textsuperscript{nd} Avenue a unified, neighborhood scale commercial corridor is supported by existence of a C1-5 overlay along 2\textsuperscript{nd} Avenue from 99\textsuperscript{th} to 112\textsuperscript{th} Street that permits storefront activities. This is designed to provide for local shopping and includes a wide range of retail stores and personal service establishments which cater to the frequently recurring needs of the residential area around 106\textsuperscript{th} and Second Avenue. Reinforcing 3\textsuperscript{rd} Avenue as a central shopping corridor is permitted too by the same C1-5 district that accommodates the retail and personal shops needed in the surrounding neighborhood. Keeping 1\textsuperscript{st} Avenue residential is encouraged by the proposed R8A contextual district that fosters new opportunities for residential development by raising the allowed density and offering new housing supply in the area.

In this respect, the proposed R8A upzoning will allow for more residential units not only along First Avenue but along Second Avenue as well, while storefronts could be accommodated in the buildings. Business street unification could be developed under these contextual mid-block zoning schemes and in the C1-5 commercial overlays. Nevertheless, while the workshop suggested that commercial intensity should decrease from Third Avenue towards First Avenue, both current and proposed zoning permits greater commercial density on First Avenue than on Second and Third Avenues.

The station design is supported by the special Transit Land Use District that extends from 105\textsuperscript{th} to 110\textsuperscript{th} on Second Avenue. The workshop recommended that entrances
should be located at 106th and 108th Streets, and possibly 105th as well. This means that the proposed entrances lie within the boundaries of the already existing zoning that enables these kinds of activities and supported uses.

Characteristics of the lots around the 106th Street station area indicate that land assemblage for specific developments could be difficult. Redevelopment and upgrading of existing uses could take place around this station area, but opportunities are constrained by the prevalence of numerous, small parcels held by a variety of owners which creates a barrier to station area development. In this context, the potential to expand the amount of open space is particularly limited, given the scarcity of vacant or developable land.

**116th Street and Second Avenue**

Commercial zoning around 116th and Second Avenue is characterized by a C1-5 commercial overlay of Second Avenue and 116th Street between Third and Second Avenues. This poses an issue to the vision of the design workshop. It was envisioned then to extend the commercial uses along 116th street from Second Avenue to the FDR Drive in a continuous strip. This is not allowed by current or proposed zoning that focuses commercial development on the avenues leaving the street mid-blocks to contextual residential uses. To have 116th from Second Avenue to the East River as a commercial corridor it would be necessary to have it zoned for commercial uses while only the corners with the avenues have that designation now.

Improving quality of life and street unification along 116th street is nonetheless possible to implement, given that the contextual zoning of the residential districts creates the
possibility to improve the streetscape by unifying the height and amenities on the street. Plantings and street furniture could be used along with developments that are in accordance with the existing residential developments. Overall, the rest of the area is zoned R7A, R7B, R7X and R8A to foster contextual development of residential uses, giving more density to the avenues and a medium-rise character to the mid-blocks. This supports the mixed-used character proposed for the rest of the area of 116th and Second Avenue.

This proposal to promote mixed uses in the area, especially on Second Avenue, is supported by the C1-5 commercial overlay of 2nd Avenue from 115th to 123rd Street. This would permit local retail to take place and support the surrounding residential uses east of Third Avenue. The proposal for a movie theater in the area could be accommodated either in the proposed East River Plaza or in the proposed C4-4D contextual district on Third Avenue, where more intensive commercial uses are allowed. As with the station area of 106th and Second Avenue, the need for affordable housing and access to job opportunities are issues that follow in this consideration of the potential to implement the proposals of the community design workshop.

In terms of the actual station, zoning present somewhat more of a challenge than in the other station areas. The workshop recommended entrances at all four corners of 116th Street and at 118th and Second Avenue on the North West and South East corners, with elevators and escalators that would ease access for senior citizens. Currently there is no Special Transit Land Use District mapped on Second Avenue at 116th or in its vicinity that requires public easements in new development, or specifies land uses associated with future subway improvements.
Land assemblage for this station location has the same concerns as the station area at 106th Street. There are few large “soft sites” available for development in the area surrounding 116th Street and Second Avenue. The area is largely developed and is characterized by small parcels held by numerous owners.

125th Street and Lexington Avenue

The two major proposals for the 125th station area are to strengthen the commercial character of the 125th street corridor and create a gateway for the area with the station as an architectural statement that is inviting and balanced for the neighborhood context in which it is located.

125th Street from 5th to 2nd Avenue is zoned C4-4. This district allows for major and secondary shopping centers, which provide for occasional family shopping needs and for essential services to business establishments over a wide area, with a substantial number of large stores generating considerable traffic. With this C4-4 designation, the district is regulated to promote convenient shopping and stable retail development by encouraging continuous retail frontage and by prohibiting service and manufacturing establishments which tend to break up such continuity.

In this respect, the area vision proposed at the design workshop is easily accommodated under the current zoning for the commercial corridor of 125th. Its character as a general commercial district enables it to be both a regional attraction and a family-oriented, neighborhood shopping destination. The station design is central to the concept established in the design workshop. As with the station at 116th Street, it lacks a Special
Transit Land Use district could facilitate easements and the development of transit-related retail and office uses. However, the commercial character of the area and uses that exist today give enough room for the area to achieve the desired character that was envisioned in the design workshop.

Although there are more and larger sites for development in this area than in the previous two locations, it is still largely developed and characterized by small parcels held by numerous owners. In these circumstances, land assemblage is a challenge to making this area a vibrant commercial corridor that mirrors development of the same 125th corridor to the West.