

3. THE COLUMBIA TEAM

With visions of Sant'Elia and a desire to provide housing in the heart of Harlem without the necessity of prior clearance and relocation, Columbia University's architects have proposed turning a blighting, elevated railroad into a community benefit.

The tracks of the New York Central Railroad rise out of the ground at 96th Street, 54 blocks north of Grand Central Station and proceed north on a viaduct, first of cyclopean masonry and then of steel, passing by the controversial, windowless school, I.S. 201 (see Nov. '66 issue) on their way to cross the Harlem River at 134th Street. The southern half of Park Avenue is the very name of elegance and corporate power; but north of 96th Street the presence of the tracks has precluded development of speculative luxury housing. Only families with extremely limited choice seek housing there: generally Negroes and Puerto Ricans.

A building over the tracks

A variety of technological problems makes it impossible to depress the railroad on its way through Harlem where it divides the area east and west into two distinct and separate communities. Both of the Harlem communities are poor (median income is around \$4,000, compared to \$6,500 for the city as a whole) and both desperately need housing (about half requires major rehabilitation or replacement); so the possibilities of the Columbia scheme are intriguing, since the last National Housing Act allows the Federal Government to write down the cost of air-rights development.

The architects have covered the tracks with a continuous concrete vault cast on movable *shuttering* which would roll up Park Avenue, presumably at a speed dictated by the rate of new residential and related construction which flanks it for its ultimate 37-block length. Vehicular traffic continues to run beneath it, although the danger from the closely placed columns supporting the tracks and the

blind east-west intersections probably indicates that even less traffic would use it than at present, and that the space might better be given over to shops and community areas. This would obviate the necessity of relocating the public market, which now uses some of this under-track space, into the proposed new structure in which the economic rents would surely alter the market's popular character.

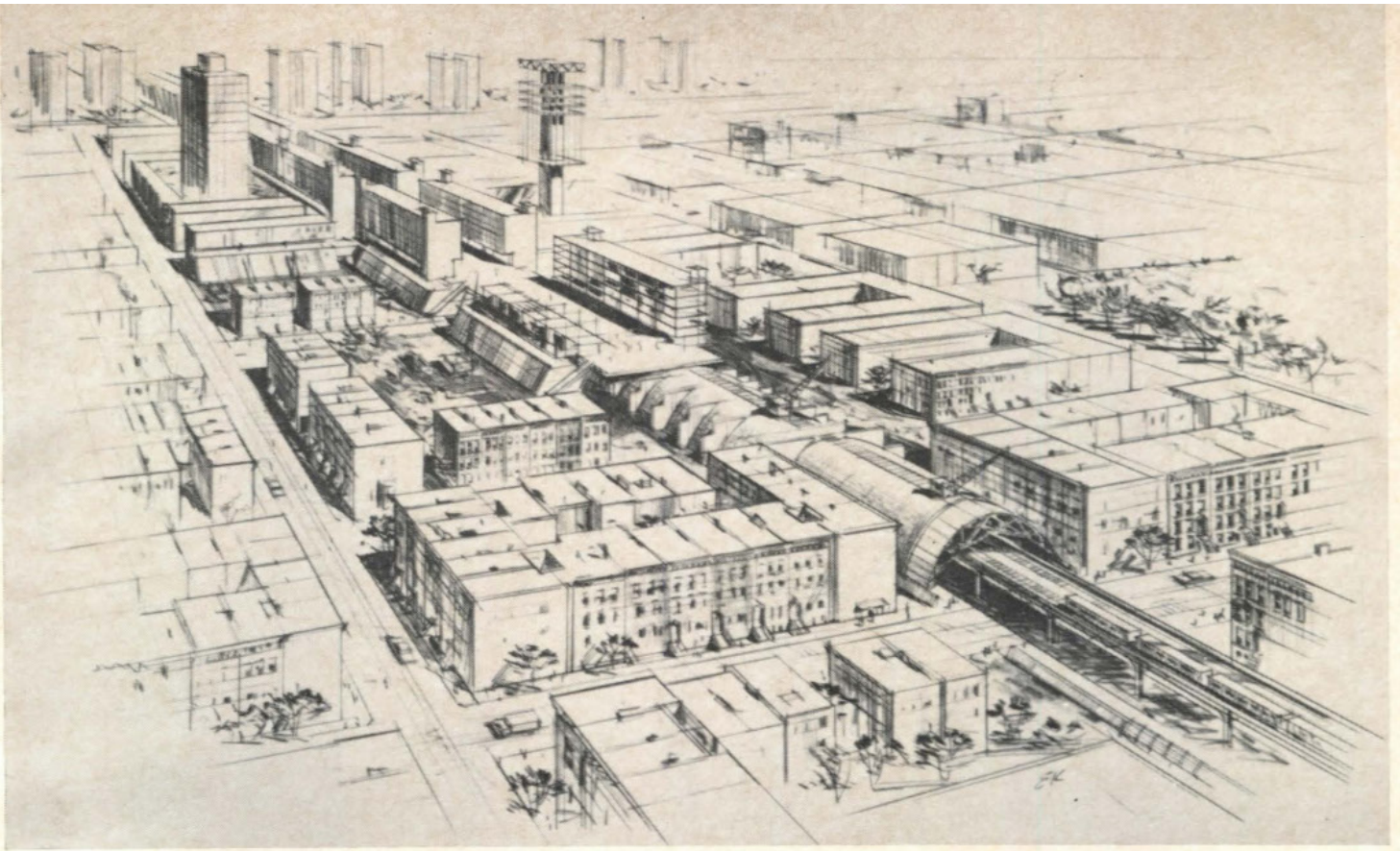
On top of the vault is a continuous — and, unfortunately, dull and undifferentiated — pedestrian walk. Electric buses run the full length one level below.

Demolition after construction

As construction proceeds northward from the entrance funnel and local residents are swept into the new air-rights housing, dilapidated structures are to be demolished and new low-rise housing, schools, shops, theaters, and stores will rise to flank the vault, culminating in a massive gate structure containing everything architects like but Harlem probably doesn't need — department store, convention hall, bus terminal, hotel, offices, etc. After that the whole thing quiets down, terminating a few blocks later in a small building which houses project management. Neat, and in broad outline perhaps the only significant way to deal with the railroad tracks.

Like most projects this one is selective about the problems it chooses to resolve. Other, tougher ones will have to be faced before this juggernaut should be released — not the least of which is that the elevated pedestrian promenade will not attract many shops and therefore promises to be every bit as dull and lifeless as the rest of Park Avenue. More importantly, the architects have chosen to emphasize the connection to White Manhattan at the south to the detriment of east-west movement. New development in this area should serve to bring the two Harlem communities together but this design suggests a fortified wall and emphasizes their separateness.





Above: over-the-tracks building shown under construction. Below: massive gate structure proposed for Park Avenue at 125th Street.

