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New Tower Takes Shape on Columbia Campus

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

The [Pritzker Prize](#)-winning architect José Rafael Moneo has had to contend with difficult sites before. At the National Museum of Roman Art in Mérida, Spain, for example, a project completed in 1986, he built a modern exhibition space over a still-buried portion of a largely excavated Roman town. In 2007 he finished an underground expansion of the early-19th-century main building of the Prado Museum in his hometown, Madrid.

But few sites have proved as challenging as his latest, at Broadway and West 120th Street, for which he has designed a \$200 million interdisciplinary science building, now under construction, for [Columbia University](#). It's not just that this project involves inserting contemporary glass-and-aluminum architecture into a corner of Columbia's main Morningside Heights campus, a landscape dominated by the historic masonry of McKim, Mead & White. Mr. Moneo, who had never before designed a building in New York City, also had to grapple with placing a tall building on top of the existing gymnasium without crushing it or even interrupting the basketball season — a daunting engineering task.

"It isn't an easy building," Mr. Moneo said one day recently, as he walked through the construction site. "The conditions were so difficult."

The building, to open next fall, will rise 14 stories and contain 50,000 square feet of laboratories; a science library for physics, chemistry, biology and psychology; a 170-seat lecture hall; and a cafe visible from the street and open to the public. To put nine stories of that content above the gym, Mr. Moneo and his engineers devised a truss system, partly visible in the diagonal lines that punctuate the facade, which transfers the weight of the 120-foot span to columns at either end.

"It is a complete building, spanning over the gymnasium but not touching the gymnasium," Mr. Moneo said. "The building is literally floating."

Beyond the structural issues, the project included a complex set of mandates, which Columbia's president, [Lee C. Bollinger](#), enumerated in an interview last week: to support, and make a statement about, Columbia's commitment to interdisciplinary science; to open the university to its neighborhood and animate its backyard; and to complement the planned campus extension, designed by [Renzo Piano](#), for a 17-acre area to the northwest.

Although the building also needed to get along with its immediate neighbors, Mr. Bollinger said, it was not meant to blend in seamlessly with the rest of the campus.

"This had to be great architecture in itself," he said, designed both to "revitalize that area of the campus" and "integrate with the surrounding communities." Rather than brick and granite, he added, it would be built with "light, open, modern materials," even if that meant courting controversy among preservationists.

Given all these criteria, Mr. Bollinger felt he had to choose someone of Mr. Moneo's stature and experience. "I wanted it to be daring but I wanted it to be by a major architect," Mr. Bollinger said. "I didn't want to select someone in the process of being established."

In a way, Mr. Moneo's years of teaching at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he also spent five years as chairman of the architecture department (1985-90), prepared him for this task.

"It was almost like an academic assignment — something you would give your best brain," said Mark Wigley, the dean of Columbia's architecture school. In this case the exercise was somehow both to "give dignity to the site and honor the ongoing

ambition of a university.”

Not everyone is happy with the results. Reacting to the renderings on the Columbia Web site bwog.net in 2007, a poster called “arch. major” wrote, “McKim, Mead & White will roll over in their graves,” adding that the building made Uris Hall, the widely derided main building of Columbia’s business school, completed in 1961, “look like the Pantheon.”

The Morningside Heights neighborhood also has a strong preservation contingent, some members of which are bound to object to the Moneo building. But in the architecture world the early reviews are promising.

“It’s really provocative,” said Barry Bergdoll, chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, who is also an author of “Mastering McKim’s Plan: Columbia’s First Century on Morningside Heights,” published in 1997 by Columbia University Press.

“It holds that corner in such a powerful place that for the first time 120th Street is not saying, ‘This is the back of Columbia,’ ” said Mr. Bergdoll, a former chairman of Columbia’s art history department. “It’s so exciting that 120th Street will finally have an entrance that’s lively, instead of just having leaves blowing around in a corridor of blank walls.”

For his part, Mr. Moneo, speaking last month in an interview at his modest office in Madrid, said he was excited about finally designing his first building in New York City. He said that for all the attention to openness, he had made a serious effort to maintain “the sense of enclosure that has been given to the campus by McKim, Mead & White,” which drafted the university’s master plan, first drawn up in 1893 and extended in 1903.

Mr. Moneo, who won the Pritzker in 1996, doesn’t have the air of a famous architect seeking to impose his stamp. At 72, he has an unassuming physical presence; slightly stooped and professorial, he speaks in low tones, his English heavily accented. And although he has a roster of major projects behind him — including the Davis Art Museum at Wellesley College in Massachusetts (1993); the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles (2002); and the Chace Center gallery at the Rhode Island School of Design art museum in Providence, R.I. (2008) — he seems to have approached the Columbia building with humility.

“He takes time to educate his team about what he’s trying to accomplish,” said Dan Brodtkin, a principal at the engineering firm Arup, which worked on the project. “We weren’t just stuffing the mechanicals into the building. He was trying to honor the original master plan.”

That plan called for an even taller building on the site, Mr. Wigley, the dean, noted. “In some sense this is a lower and I think much more respectful building,” he said. “It has a collegial relationship to the existing campus and to the corner — therefore to the community.”

Touring the building in New York, -- done in association with the architecture firm Davis Brody Bond Aedas and Turner Construction Company -- Mr. Moneo said he was glad to see how it was coming along. “Buildings are always better than drawings and models,” he said. “I am pleased to realize once more the importance of the building in the entire frame of the campus. It is much more perceptible now.”

However jarring the Moneo structure may seem at first when juxtaposed with the McKim buildings that surround it, Mr. Wigley, who advised on the selection of Mr. Moneo, said he believed that it would end up something of a classic. When its long western facade begins to be seen regularly in the soft light of sunset, he predicted, the building “will become beloved.”

“Architects should aim for building something whose beauty is clear but deepens with time, so that later on you couldn’t imagine the city without it,” Mr. Wigley added. “I can feel that coming.”

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