

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXVI, Number 66, 3 June 1992 — Building of research lab delayed by court appeal [ARTICLE]

# Building of research lab delayed by court appeal

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*Spectator Summer Board*

Columbia may build a biomedical research center at the site of the Audubon Theater and Ballroom, located on 165th Street and Broadway, if the appeal of a lawsuit brought against the city of New York by members of Save the Audubon Coalition (STAC) fails.

The lawsuit, which is under appeal in the appellate division of the New York State Supreme Court, was originally dismissed last October, according to Director of Project Development and Coordination Bernhard Haeckel. The court will rule on the appeal within the next month. If it fails, construction of the center will begin in the fall.

Thus far, STAC has been unsuccessful in its lawsuit against the city at all levels of the court.

Haeckel said he hoped the court would rule in favor of the research center.

“You never know. You can’t tell what the courts are going to do. We hope they side with us,” Haeckel said.

The Audubon Ballroom, which is the site of the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X, has been surrounded by controversy since Columbia originally proposed to demolish the theater and ballroom two years ago.

“The biotechnical research center is death to our community. The Audubon ballroom belongs to the community,” STAC member Oliver Armstrong said.

Armstrong said the plan for the center was a conspiracy aimed at destroying black and Latino communities.

“Why is it planned for black and Latino communities? A white community wouldn’t allow it to be built,” he said.

Members of STAC have not yet decided exactly what functions the center would perform, nor from where the money to finance it would

come.

“It [the multicultural center] would do all of the things we see fit,” Armstrong said.

Members of STAC held a three-hour rally last Saturday afternoon in front of the Audubon Theater to protest the razing of the Audubon theater, claiming they would not accept any compromise.

Protesters made speeches criticizing Columbia and the city at the rally, and held banners that said ‘Biotechnology is death’ and ‘Our community is threatened by biotechnology,’ according to Armstrong.

Because of objections raised to the University’s plan, the deteriorated facade of the theater and most of the ballroom were preserved through an agreement between the city, defenders of the ballroom, and the University, that was made official last March when Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger issued a decision to preserve the 78-year-old facade and ballroom.

The center, which will be used by private companies for biomedical research, will be built on the site of the Audubon theater and part of the ballroom.

The area will consist of two structures, a commercial building on the south part of the theater and a University research building on the north side, according to Health Sciences Deputy Vice President for External Relations William Polf.

The south building will be rented by local, national, and international private research companies, who will work in conjunction with other medical centers in the area, such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the School of Public Health, according to Polf.

Heckel, according to Polf.  
The building will be financed by a consortium of the University, the city, and the state Urban Development Corporation.

The second phase of construction will include the creation of a University-owned Center for Disease Prevention on the northern part of the site, according to Polf.

“This center will house a range of biomedical research ... treatments, therapies ... genetic structures [for AIDS research],” Polf said.

The center will be financed by the federal and state government, and private donations.

Demolition of decrepit structures and preservation of the Audubon ballroom will cost almost \$10 million. Mesinger will provide \$1.1 million from her discretionary funds, and the city will provide \$8.7 million, according to Polf.

Construction of the research center will cost \$27.5 million, \$11 million of which will be contributed by the city, \$8.1 million by the state, and \$8.6 million by the University.

Columbia will finance its portion of the cost with equity and borrowed money, according to Haeckel.

Haeckel said the biomedical research center will help the economy of the Washington Heights community.

“We have plans to make sure that as much as possible, jobs will be locally filled,” he said.

Members of STAC oppose this agreement, and demand that the entire structure be renovated and changed into a ‘multicultural center.’

Armstrong said STAC rejects

the compromise calling for the partial preservation of the theater and ballroom and the construction of the research center and said the city is trying to fool people into thinking they are being fairly represented.

“They’re fooling people into thinking that they are contributing ... but people aren’t being fooled,” he said.

In March of 1990, Local Community Board 12 in Washington Heights voted in favor of the project with over a two-thirds majority.

Haeckel said the majority of the community fully supports the research center, and that STAC represents a small number of activists from outside the Washington Heights neighborhood who oppose it.

“The local community has supported this project for the past ten years. Some people from Brooklyn oppose the project. In the neighborhood, it is clearly a minority who oppose the plan,” Haeckel said.

Armstrong charged that the center would create toxic and hazardous chemicals that will endanger the community.

The research conducted in the center would be environmentally safe and conducted in proper conditions, according to Polf, who said that biomedical research centers do not hold chemicals any more dangerous than those found in an average chemistry lab or drug store.

Haeckel said that all proper sanitation laws would be upheld and that STAC’s claims were unfounded.

“It’s baloney. There will be stringent measures in the disposal of all chemicals and drugs,” Haeckel said.