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SPECTRUM

B-C STAC talks back: a response

By Members of the Barnard-
Columbia Save the Audubon
Coalition

By now, you have probably heard of crazed radicals disturbing innocent people over the fate of the Audubon Ballroom.

Call us what you will.

To students, Columbia University may appear to be an apolitical higher learning institution. This institution, however, operates as a major player in the politics and economy of New York City. Investigation of Columbia's past and present actions affords an educational experience that cannot and will never be taught in the classroom.

Let us clear up some misconceptions about the Audubon Ballroom.

Columbia University, in cooperation with the City of New York, the Economic Development Corporation (EDC), and the New York State Urban Development Corporation, intends to build a five-building

research complex devoted to biotechnological research on four blocks, with the first building on the site where the Audubon Ballroom now stands.

Although it owns the Audubon Ballroom, Columbia University does not own the land beneath it. The City of New York, which owns the land, will lease it to the EDC, which will lease it to Columbia, which will then in turn lease it to as-of-yet unannounced pharmaceutical companies.

The Audubon Ballroom-San Juan Theater complex occupies a full block in northern Manhattan. It is bounded by Broadway, 165th Street, St. Nicholas Avenue, and 166th Street. Directly across Broadway is the Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital (specifically, the Babies Hospital), and the Health Sciences campus.

The Audubon was built in 1912 as the first in Joseph Fox's empire of movie palaces. The building was used as a vaudeville theater, a dance hall, and as a synagogue by Jewish refugees. It was the site of the founding of the Transit Workers' Union. Don Pedro Albizu Campos, the militant head of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, spoke there. The building is best known as the site of Malcolm X's assassination in 1965.

The Audubon Ballroom was acquired by the City in 1967. Although the State Historic Preservation Of-

office placed the Audubon on the State Register of Historic Places, and the staff of the Landmarks Preservation Office (LPC) recommended that it be considered for landmark status, the LPC commissioners (who are appointed by the mayor) never even put it on their calendar for consideration as a landmark. In 1986, the Audubon was recognized as eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. When a building is deemed eligible, the owner's permission is required to have it listed. The City refused. The City of New York has held the property and allowed it to deteriorate while waiting for investors to develop it.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this project takes up two massive volumes and focuses on the project's effects on the circulation of traffic. The brief EIS section on public health impact admits the facility will feature "potentially

hazardous
chemical, mi-
croorganisms,
and radioactive
materials" [Fi-

nal Environmental Impact Statement, June 1990, Volume I, II. K-1]. It says the building's tenants are unknown at this time, and consequently, information on the exact materials to be used cannot be given. The EIS consistently ignores the possibility of accidents and human error. There has been no response to affidavits by scientists in the Save the Audubon Coalition lawsuit asserting that current regulations are not necessarily adequate to ensure public safety.

The EIS and the University's "Audubon Fact Sheet" say that the University will supervise itself. Are they going to crack down on their

they going to crack down on their money-generating tenants? The maximum penalty for noncompliance with the regulations is merely eviction. This provision itself is inadequate if public health has already suffered. Do you believe that accidents never happen?

Biotech may someday yield a cure for AIDS or cancer, but this lab will be rated Bio-Safety Level 2 (BL-2), and so will not host research on these diseases. Rebecca Goldberg of the Environmental Defense Fund submitted an affidavit on Barnard-Columbia Save the Audubon Coalition's (BC-STAC) behalf in which she wrote, "BL-2 containment could involve human pathogens. Working with the viruses causing rabies, kuru and pox diseases, for example, could be done at BL-2 containment." There is nothing in writing to indicate that the work done will have anything other than commercial applications. Why do this in one of the most densely-populated areas in the United States?

Columbia and the city government are thrilled by this project because the Audubon Research Park will be the first big biotech lab this city has ever seen. Columbia asked for the site's zoning to be changed, and then had the city's zoning laws rewritten to permit scientific research to take place in this type of commercial zone. Jonathan Cole's statement at the May 2, 1990 meeting of the City Planning Commission indicated that the administration's main concern is the desire to cash in as the city tries to make biotech its new economic engine: "With the Mayor's support, with the able guidance from his administration, with the diligent participation by Community Board 12, and with the back-

ing from many other elected officials, this first initiative to attract biomedical companies to New York has progressed and is now before you for your consideration.”

Community Board 12 is the advisory committee that voted to approve the project. It is ridiculous to point to their approval as representing the people’s best interests since Community Board 12 members were appointed by the Borough President, not elected by the people, and especially since the board meets in the middle of the Columbia Health Sciences campus. The police barred community members and activists from the April 24, 1990 meeting of Community Board 12.

This exercise in alleged “Free Enterprise” is a collaboration between our University’s administrators and Trustees, the New York State Urban Development Corporation, and the Economic Development Corporation. These two “Corporations” dispense public money. According to the University’s “Audubon Fact Sheet,” out of the \$28 million needed to create the Audubon Research Building (ARB), \$20 million will come from these two sources of public funds. The total project, the five-building Audubon Research Park, will cost \$300 million. How does massive government funding (otherwise known as spending taxpayers’ money) fit into the definition of “Free Enterprise”?

The people who live and work in the blocks surrounding the Audubon have not been informed of the plans for their neighborhood. While doing outreach in Washington Heights, we found no one knows the true

nature of the proposed facility. Apartment buildings surround the Audubon and the three other blocks to be developed. Public School 128 is directly across 168th Street from Block Four of the project site.

Block Four is presently occupied by a sports club, a pizza restaurant, an ice cream parlor, a television repair shop, a beauty school, a Chemical Bank, and a child care center. Child care is desperately needed in Washington Heights. There is a waiting list of 167 children for the center, but it and all the other operations will be demolished.

The project's defenders claim that the labs will revitalize the area's economy. However, out of 278 jobs created by the first building, only 40 percent will be for non-scientists. One hundred ten service-oriented jobs is a pittance when you consider the area's population, and the number of jobs that are going to be eliminated as a result of the displacement of community-owned businesses.

The EIS mentions an anticipated need for 241 housing units for new workers. Gentrification equals displacement of neighborhood residents. City services do not come to a neighborhood until people with money and influence start living in it. Instead of providing basic services, the City of New York is catering to the needs of Columbia, and continuing to disregard the rights of citizens without influence.

The legacy of Malcolm X does not belong to the Malcolm X Memorial Commission, which includes his widow, Dr. Betty Shabazz; his friends, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee; and Spike Lee, who were all appointed by David Dinkins. Dinkins

has backed Columbia's plans for the Ballroom since he was Borough President. These prominent figures help to legitimize the project in the minds of some people, but their approval means nothing. Who gave them jurisdiction over history? The site of Malcolm X's assassination and his legacy belong to the people of New York, of the United States, and of the world. The Save the Audubon Coalition has asserted that the Audubon Ballroom should be restored and given back to the people as an international, multicultural resource center open to the community. Designs for this building exist. Putting Malcolm X's name on a token memorial in a commercial venture is an inexcusable insult to a man who advocated human rights and preached self-determination for oppressed people.

It is not our intention to antagonize students. We are students like yourselves. Some consider us to be chronic malcontents who protest merely to gratify our egos, but there are serious issues at the heart of our actions. We regret any inconvenience we may have caused, but we insist that all Columbia students, faculty, administrators, and employees, as human beings, reconsider whether the evils we witness around us are facilitated by our compliance or resisted by our active protests. We feel compelled to object when our university prioritizes profit over the quality of people's lives.

Columbia is also expanding the Psychiatric Institute into Inwood Park. The 1968 protests began when the University tried to put the Gym in Morningside Park. The Audubon project is part of a longer history.

Barnard-Columbia Save the

Barnard-Columbia Save the Audubon Coalition was formed in response to information brought to campus by members of the city-wide Save the Audubon Coalition. B-C STAC is not a front for any other organization. We are not a product of, or identical to, the Earth Coalition, the Black Students Organization, or the International Socialist Organization. We are all shades of humanity, and we subscribe to different ideologies.

We are still organizing. The residents around the Audubon are just beginning to learn what the University and the City government plan to do to their community. We continue to research and fight the University's lies, even as work crews continue to dismantle the historic site. We will provide more detailed information at campus forums in the future.

It is not too late to stop the unjust actions of your university. We hope that you will join with us in acquiring a real Columbia education.

The Barnard-Columbia Save the Audubon Coalition is an ad-hoc student group.

Let's clear up some misconceptions about the Audubon Ballroom.

