

Plan for Uris Hall, Arts and Sciences

March 19, 2021

Prepared by the Office of the Executive Vice President for Arts and Sciences in response to and with input from the Uris Visioning Committee, which reported to the faculty in January of 2019, and read and responded to a previous draft of this response in February. Additional consultation with the Policy and Planning Committee of Arts and Sciences and the chairs took place in early March.

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Overview and Vision

Uris Hall sits at the very center of Columbia’s Morningside campus, adjacent to Science and Engineering quadrangles, next door to Avery Library, and a short walk from virtually every academic and student space from East Campus to Broadway. The building sits on the footprint of what was planned, in the 1890’s, to be a grand University Hall, a building that was finally built on a small scale (and to general ridicule—it was called “The Steamboat on the Hill”) in the 1920s due to lack of funding and then demolished in 1959 when Uris was built. Its central location, if not its architecture, has thus long been understood to be special, with the potential to define the university community and gather its people in an inspiring space at the heart of Morningside.

President Lee Bollinger’s gift of Uris to the Arts and Sciences represents a once-a-century opportunity to seize this potential, to unify Morningside campus with truly common space. A transformational renovation of the lower floors of Uris Hall would allow the building to unite and inspire Columbians for the century to come. Just as Low Steps serve as the beloved outdoor common space for students, faculty, and community, a commons at Uris, occupying the lower floors of Uris Hall, could become their indoor counterpart. If resources are not available for transformational renovation that would make the space itself more inspiring, a more modest renovation, focusing on the priorities of common space and classrooms, can still fundamentally change the sense of unity in Arts and Science.

Indeed, Arts and Sciences has long excelled in innovative intellectual work. Beyond our departments, the richness of our centers and institutes distinguishes us among peers and continually generates both programming and innovative approaches to cross-disciplinary scholarship. This is not to be taken for granted, but neither is it the case that we needed a new building to achieve this. We do it every day, continually renewing our ways of working together. This fundamental character of Arts and Sciences will be lifted up by Uris, but continues in all corners.

To gather more flexibly, opportunistically, and serendipitously--this, by contrast, has been hard to achieve. Siloed resources and the need to book and pay for space long in advance has made it harder to use our space well and make the most of our collective energies. Teaching at the cutting edge of our pedagogical knowledge is sometimes hampered by the very spaces in which students and faculty meet.

It has also been difficult to achieve synergies among units where there are not already strong intellectual ties, but where the payoff of new ties could be profound. The compactness of our campus has always meant that natural synergies occur across buildings and departments. But what if areas that have been more distant--physically, intellectually, demographically--had occasion to explore their connections? This is the untapped potential of a truly inclusive space. Uris must be inclusive in just this way.

Becoming a true commons for the Arts and Sciences, Uris will bring students and faculty together in ways not possible in our existing spaces, connecting constituencies from across the disciplines, not siloed individually but housed communally. Permeable and open to the campus community, the building will center on beautiful library space newly and fully available to the Arts and Sciences community, and by modern, flexible classroom and gathering space. The building will project our diversity and values as well as the range of our excellence. It will be filled, morning to night, with students, faculty, and community members engaged in common projects. As a common good to be shared across Arts and Sciences, the design and use of the building must generate benefits beyond any one unit or constituency.

At any lively commons, all manner of persons may meet, from points near and far. In Uris, we place a marker, open doors, and--with both intention and serendipity--build a new public square, unifying our campus and setting the conditions for the next incarnation of excellence and innovation in Arts and Sciences.

History and Principles of the Uris Plan

With input from at least two generations of faculty committees starting in 2015, extensive recent architectural studies of space at Morningside, and processes of consultation normal in the course of faculty governance in Arts and Sciences--including conversations with chairs, PPC, and other stake-holders--we now go forward after a COVID-related delay with an integrated vision for the building and some critical next steps of consultation. The Columbia School of Business plans to vacate the building by February, 2022.

Planning committees for Uris Hall have been convening since 2015, with more and less intensity and vigor, with varying configurations of administrative, faculty, and student involvement. While this process was underway in fits and starts over the years, Arts and Sciences and the world kept moving and changing. Our circumstances look very different in the post-pandemic world of 2021 than they did when David Madigan convened the first group to consider planning for Uris, a process he began in late 2015 and 2016, or when Maya Tolstoy and Jean Howard convened another committee in the fall of 2018, which issued its draft report for faculty comment at the start of 2019.

The most recent Uris committee and the principles articulated in its report are the best touchstones for the concrete planning that begins now, as we prepare to occupy the building and the window of time opens in which any initial or major renovations must be accomplished. We in Arts and Sciences are in debt to this group of colleagues for their vision and their work.

Central Themes from the 2019 Uris Report

The 2019 report outlines a clear vision of Uris as a resource to enhance the collective intellectual life and pedagogical vitality of the Arts and Sciences rather than simply as a quick fix for problems of overcrowding elsewhere or to replicate existing modes of teaching and research rather than to spur innovation:

“The Committee urges that wherever possible space in Uris be viewed as public and shared, rather than private and sequestered; that rooms serve many purposes, rather than just one; that space be reconfigurable rather than fixed; and that intelligent adjacencies be integrated at every opportunity. It should serve the intellectual life of students and faculty, keeping administrative offices to an absolute minimum.”

Priorities articulated in the report include:

- “intelligent adjacencies” to “invite faculty to transcend both spatial and intellectual silos through physical adjacencies aimed at stimulating new questions and ways of thinking among existing and newly-created academic entities.”
- Flexible, shared spaces that benefit units that will not move into the building. The committee envisioned gathering spaces available “rent-free” to A&S units, “to enable scholarly activity within Arts and Sciences and to make it available to a wider public.” Spaces would be used for more than one purpose by more than one program throughout the day and throughout the week and year.
- Modern classroom space, particularly “large *lecture rooms* and . . . *different kinds of classrooms*: above all, those that do not have seats bolted to the floor but that have movable chairs and tables, smartboards, and collaborative work spaces.”

The report goes on to say: “The new Uris would invite faculty to transcend both spatial and intellectual silos Research undertaken in the tower spaces should arise from the intellectual aspirations of the faculty.”

The committee report noted that some academic units would move into the space, but did not recommend which ones should do so. This document therefore devotes significant discussion to this matter, below.

An overarching note is worth adding: architectural considerations will have effects on decisions about what is best located where. Sometimes location preferences in an abstract sense will have to be adjusted to fit the hard facts of the building if and when changing the structure is either impossible or prohibitively expensive. These constraints will emerge, inevitably yet unpredictably, as design work begins, so keeping our priorities straight while being flexible about how to implement them will be critical.

Top priorities for renovation investment: Gathering space and flexible teaching space

Uris must, as the report recommends, include public space that can benefit all of A&S, our faculty and our students. To that end, we aim to transform parts of the first floor, particularly the café and terrace areas, in such a way that they can be flexibly used for medium-sized conferences, for occasional seminars, and for social gatherings, bookable by any A&S unit. This is the area we would put at the top of the priority list for transformative renovation, working hand in hand with Columbia dining to ensure that the café remains integrated into that new vision.

Local investments in the former faculty room on the first floor will make it suitable not only for meetings and classes but for music, readings, and other medium-scale performance events, and for informal rotating art exhibitions. These uses will carry immediate benefits for units and programs such as the Department of Music, the Center for Jazz Studies, A&S programs in writing and literature, the School of the Arts, and Mellon-sponsored arts initiatives in the Department of African American and African Diaspora Studies. While it is not possible, architecturally speaking, to create additional large lecture rooms beyond the ones already built into the building’s floor plan, these nevertheless represent a significant expansion of such rooms available to Arts and Sciences.

In support of these priorities, roughly 66% of the area of the base would be devoted to common space and flexible classroom space, including most of the first floor, the whole of the 300 level, and additional spaces at the intersection of A&S and Watson Library (the Business School Library will move along with the Business School, but Watson will remain a library for Morningside use). Roughly 13% of the base would be available through an open RFP process described below, designed for smaller and medium sized uses, and roughly 22%, mainly interior to the building, would be academic anchor space.

Both new and existing classrooms, seminar rooms, and conference rooms of various sizes would not be sequestered to departments, but would be scheduled collectively by Arts and Sciences to

make the maximum use of the space, working with the Registrar in the same way that departments sometimes do when they make sequestered space available for classes,. Some priorities in scheduling would be worked out in consultation with units across A&S to address particular acute needs—as in the English department, for example, which does not have regular access to a room large enough for a meeting of its entire faculty. More discussion will be needed to identify these opportunities.

A small group led by the EVP's office (EVP, Divisional deans, A&S deans, architects and other professional staff in A&S and Facilities) and including faculty, with one overlapping member from the Uris Visioning Committee, will develop and guide the implementation of the design of these spaces in the coming months. What can be done and when will depend upon the financial resources we are able to direct to these projects.

Shared Library/A&S Space

Fleshing out the vision for spaces where A&S space and Watson Library meet requires an additional platform for faculty input, and is central to the transformation of the building into a place that fosters innovative pedagogy and research. Picking up where the Uris Visioning Committee of 2019 left off, a Uris Library Joint Steering Committee, co-chaired by Ann Thornton, Vice Provost and University Librarian, and Jean Howard, George Delacorte Professor in the Humanities and co-chair of the 2019 Uris Visioning Committee, will begin meeting in March to set the course for program and design development of the spaces that might be productively shared in the areas in the building's base where Library and A&S spaces meet.

The committee will be charged to evaluate, among other things, the opportunities for student and faculty space conducive to innovative forms of research and teaching, and the question of when and if outside consultation might be useful to the program design process. The committee's work will be informed by the report of the Uris Visioning Committee from 2019, and by ongoing consultation with faculty, students, research librarians, CTL and other research and teaching supports on campus. [Add in appendix: membership of this committee]

Strategy for Academic Anchor Space and the Open RFP Process

Uris is a large space, with tower floors and spaces in the interior of the base that do not lend themselves to easy public access or a merely occasional or programmatic approach to use. Many are already configured to support the kinds of work that A&S academic units require. To anchor the building and ensure its full and vibrant use, research and teaching must occur there daily. Thus, some of the space will need to be grounded and organized by the fundamental teaching and research units of Arts and Sciences--which is to say, departments--with a vision towards amplified excellence both for the unit itself and A&S as a whole.

Criteria for Academic Anchor Space Occupancy

The bar for moving any unit into academic anchor space would be high. To make the best and most impactful use of the space, any academic unit moving to Uris should meet many or most of the following criteria:

- The move will allow the unit to do its research, teaching, and outreach in new and better ways, and set it up for increased excellence now and in the future.
- The move will bring students and faculty together regularly in the space throughout the day, week, and year.
- The unit has the potential to bring community members from outside Columbia--particularly from neighboring parts of the city--into the space, and ideally shows a track record of doing so.
- The unit is well positioned to generate new connections between units in the building and nearby that will expand the existing intellectual networks of A&S in positive ways.
- The move advances core Arts and Sciences commitments in addition to research and teaching excellence, such as fostering diversity and a welcoming climate, or contributing to A&S's financial stability by developing revenue streams or saving on the cost of rental space.
- The work of the unit lends itself well to the existing character of the Uris Space.
- The move will leave space behind for a use that is ideally more beneficial than the current use. Formerly occupied space can be repurposed to allow additional new benefits for other units and for A&S as a whole.
- The move solves problems for the unit and/or A&S generally that are otherwise hard to solve.
- The space does not simply replicate existing organization and activity that has been possible under current conditions, even if a move improves on current conditions. Improvements would ideally change the game for the unit and A&S in a substantial way rather than enabling an incremental shift (in scale, quality of experience, etc.).

Because of the complexity of these criteria taken together, the EVP's office initiated conversations with units that seemed to be promising candidates over the past several months. These possibilities are at an early stage of being discussed at the level of whole departments, having begun as exploratory conversations with chairs to see whether there was any interest and to learn more about the situation of given units. Four units--African American and African Diaspora Studies, Statistics, Economics and Psychology--have been engaged with these conversations after an open call to chairs to step forward with expressions of department interest.

Final decisions about the building's academic anchor space will be made this spring by the senior leadership of A&S in consultation with the PPC and informed by the report of the Visioning Committee.

RFP Process:

The RFP process for space in Uris beyond common spaces and academic anchor spaces, and for spaces left open elsewhere after other units relocate, will unfold over a longer time period. For these smaller or medium-sized spaces, we seek new ideas and initiatives as well as proposals for moving existing units that fit some or all of the above criteria. Developing the vision for that space in the context of the building will happen iteratively, starting with the call for proposals, and evolving as these come in next fall.

Proposals may be for time-delimited projects, programs, and assemblages of faculty and students as well as for permanent occupancy. They may also be for novel common-space configurations not already planned, or planned spaces that are thought to need expanding--ie. more common classroom space of a particular kind, more common gathering space to facilitate particular kinds of work. The RFP will be developed with assistance from members of the Visioning Committee and in consultation with the divisional deans, chairs, center and institute directors, and the PPC.

The timeline for these proposals, and more details about the criteria and opportunities, will be forthcoming in late spring or early summer, with a deadline of September, 2021. Decisions will be made by senior leadership in A&S in consultation with the PPC, by October 15, 2021.

Timetable for final consultation process and building occupation

This response was shared first with the Uris Visioning Committee of 2019. After gaining their input, it will be shared with the PPC, Chairs, Directors of Centers and Institutes, and the faculty. The content will be presented in a special meeting for faculty and the report and response will be available on the A&S website. The Joint Uris Library Steering committee will report to the faculty in the fall term of 2021.

In parallel to this process, Facilities will be conducting physical assessments of the building in preparation for the design phase of the work. We expect the Business School to vacate the space completely by February of 2022. We hope that spaces needing only cosmetic refreshing will be available for occupation starting in the summer of 2022. Renovated spaces will be available on a schedule determined by the work needed. We will include faculty and staff in the design and construction phase conversations, and units occupying the building will advise for particular spaces they are assigned. Regular updates on the planning will be discussed with PPC and other faculty bodies.