A battle for New York

Evolving: The NYU expansion plan involves integrating new buildings among existing ones on two Greenwich Village “superblocks.” Photo: AP

The battle for Greenwich Village, now before the City Council, isn't about buildings but about the city's capacity to compete in the 21st century.

New York University’s expansion plan has generated intense opposition from Village residents. That's understandable: No one wants to live next to new construction that will disrupt their lives, fill in open space and block their views.

But it's not just NYU that needs these new classrooms, labs, academic offices, housing and performance spaces: The city does, too.

Higher education is one of New York's growth industries. We have more people enrolled in degree programs than the entire population of Atlanta and more foreign students than any other US city.

Over the last quarter century, while firms like Lehman Bros. and Drexel Burnham collapsed, our colleges and universities have thrived. From 1991 to 2011, employment in the city's private colleges and universities grew 77 percent.

Even with the Internet, there is no substitute for the spontaneous flow of ideas that occurs face to face in a classroom, in a laboratory or over a cup of coffee. So, even as we increasingly rely on e-mail and online information, institutions that stimulate the flow of ideas directly between people grow more valuable.
And cities are a natural home to such institutions. As Enrico Moretti puts it in “The New Geography of Jobs”: “Cities are not just a collection of individuals but complex, interrelated environments that foster the generation of new ideas and new ways of doing business.”

Greenwich Village has historically been a place to live and work, with a rich mixture of uses — and an evolving one. The industrial-era manufacturing lofts along the Broadway corridor have become high-tech offices, housing and design studios. Sixth Avenue near West 4th Street is lined with tattoo shops, serving kids from the suburbs and the rest of the city, while the Bleecker-McDougal Street entertainment complex remains a mecca for young people, with bars, restaurants, comedy clubs and live music venues.

And NYU has evolved along with the community for two centuries. New Yorkers like Frank McCourt, Spike Lee and Cynthia Ozick got their start at NYU; Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, was on the faculty in the 19th century.

There is no basis to the claim that NYU’s plan will destroy the community. The city Landmark Preservation Commission has established districts that protect the historic buildings in these neighborhoods. Indeed, several NYU buildings have been designated as landmarks, ensuring the future integrity of these historic structures.

As an NYU faculty member for the last 39 years, I opposed the initial NYU proposal to build a new tower on the Silver Towers landmark site — a proposal NYU wisely withdrew.

Construction noise and traffic are tough to live with, but this is New York — where no one’s insulated from the roar of motorcycles, the sirens of firetrucks and police cars or jackhammers digging up our streets.

A key source of controversy is the amount of housing NYU wants to build. But there’s no other nearby location for students and faculty to live. Greenwich Village and SoHo are two of the most expensive places to live in the city, with apartment prices exceeding $1,200 per square foot. (Jane Jacobs, the great chronicler and defender of the Village and other city neighborhoods, would be shocked to discover that a Greenwich Village apartment now costs more than a same-size one on the Upper East Side.)

That’s why NYU needs to build new housing — which, importantly, will add to, not diminish, the area’s middle-class rental stock. Indeed, it will be almost unique in that regard: Almost all other new housing in SoHo and the Village consists of luxury condos.

The battle for Greenwich Village is too important to be determined by a handful of celebrities and local politicians. Every New Yorker has a stake in this battle.

New York City never stands still, always adapting to new economic forces and demographic flows. Our future depends on generating innovative ideas and educating workers for the 21st century. For 400 years, the key to New York’s success has been that we never turn our back on the future.

Mitchell L. Moss is a professor of urban policy and planning at NYU’s Wagner School of Public Service.