



River Park Towers looking north along Metro-North Hudson Line

EXISTING STATIONS

MORRIS HEIGHTS STATION

MORRIS HEIGHTS

CONNECTING THE ISLAND



INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

The Morris Heights Metro-North Station and its surrounding features, which include Roberto Clemente State Park, Public School 230, and the River Park Towers development, are isolated from the surrounding community largely due to their separation from the upland community by the combination of the Metro-North rail corridor and the Major Deegan Expressway. This separation is to the degree that an ‘island effect’ has emerged between the area west of the station and the larger community. This isolation has been compounded by a period of disinvestment and high crime rates, which, while improving, in the aggregate, have contributed to low rail ridership, underutilized park facilities, and inadequate community amenities. This section examines the issues which contribute to the area’s isolation and identifies best practice solutions that can be applied to mitigate them.

AREA CHARACTERISTICS

The Morris Heights Metro-North Station is located on the north side of W. Tremont Avenue on an overpass which spans both the Metro-North corridor and the Major Deegan Expressway. The overpass is also the entrance point to Roberto Clemente State Park (RCSP) and the center platform of the station itself is adjacent to RCSP parking lot.

As one of our “access stations” the focus is generally on the area within the quarter mile radius of the station. In this particular focus area, four key features are clustered between the Harlem River and Major Deegan Expressway. These features include:

- The Morris Heights Metro-North station, which provides southbound access to Manhattan’s Grand Central Station in 17 minutes as well as northbound access to Yonkers, Poughkeepsie and Upstate New York. As of 2012, it had the lowest total boardings of all full time Hudson Line Stations.
- Roberto Clemente State Park, established along the Harlem River in 1973, which is a regional recreation asset that is unfortunately isolated from many potential users in the upland community. The Park serves as a key public access point to the waterfront and a critical link in the potential Harlem River Greenway.
- River Park Towers was built in 1974, as part of the Mitchell-Lama middle income housing program, and consists of two towers, forty-two and forty-four stories, totaling 1654 units. The property sits on the Harlem River in Roberto Clemente Park, next to PS 230 and the Metro-North station. In 2013 the property was purchased by a private management firm whose intentions include adding more than 1500 security cameras and other various improvements.

“ Roberto Clemente State Park is a vital resource to the surrounding West Bronx community in providing recreational and cultural resources. Annual attendance is 1.3 million. The Park has also long been the only access point to the water on the Bronx side of the Harlem River. However, much could be done to improve physical connections between the park the community, and to improve streetscape around the Park. ”

| David Brito, Deputy Regional Director NYS Parks |



FIGURE 1 | Entrance of Morris Heights station area, intersection of West Tremont Avenue and Cedar Avenue.

COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS | Morris Heights Study Area

Metro-North Station Weekday Ridership (2011)



36 inbound passengers
107 outbound passengers

NYC Subway Station Daily Ridership (2012)*

4 176th St: 5,623 weekday | 6,598 weekend
4 Burnside Ave: 11,387 weekday | 12,070 weekend

- Most residents do not have access to a vehicle, either walking or taking public transit to work; this points a great need for more pedestrian crossings and inter-modal access to public transportation
- Local residents generally have a low per capita income, and a very high rate of renter-occupied units; improved public space amenities would provide opportunities for greater physical and street activity, increasing the perception of safety in the neighborhood

| | STUDY AREA ^{1,2} | THE BRONX | NEW YORK CITY |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Hispanic | 65% | 53% | 29% |
| Per Capita Income | \$12,258 | \$17,992 | \$31,417 |
| Renter Occupied Units | 96% | 79% | 68% |
| Housing Units with No Access to a Vehicle | 70% | 59% | 56% |
| With Access to One Vehicle | 25% | 30% | 31% |
| Take Public Transit or Walk to Work | 69% | 64% | 67% |
| Population Density | 70,637 | 32,536 | 26,953 |
| Unemployment Rate (2010) | 13% | 12% | 11% |
| TOTAL POPULATION | 48,141 | 1,365,725 | 8,336,697 |

¹ The study area is based on select Census tracts within a 1/2 mile radius of the Morris Heights station

² United States Bureau of the Census, 2006-2010 American community Survey 5-Year Estimates

* MTA Subway Ridership, 2012. http://www.mta.info/nyct/facts/ridership/#chart_s



Land Uses

- One and Two Family Homes
- Multi-Family Walkups
- Multi-family Elevator buildings
- Mixed Com/Residential Buildings
- Commercial Buildings
- Institutional Buildings
- Manufacturing Buildings
- Transportation/Utility Buildings
- Park/Open Space
- Parking Lots
- Vacant Land

Transportation

- Metro North Hudson Line
- B/D Subway Lines
- Bus Routes
- 4 Subway Line

Notable Land Uses Features:

- ① Parkland west of Major Deegan Expressway, with the exception of River Park Towers residential development to the southeast.
- ② Several institutional uses in the form of primary and secondary schools, as well as religious buildings
- ③ Mid-density residential to the east in Morris Heights neighborhood

- Public School 230 (Roland N. Patterson) is a 447 student K-5 elementary school, situated immediately over the rail corridor, and between the two Major Deegan overpasses. PS 230 is being phased out and replaced due to poor performance in 2016. The Department of Education has proposed to open and co-locate a new district elementary school in the building.

Subway access to the area is limited with the #4 at Jerome Avenue, and Burnside Avenue or 176th Street, and the B/D lines at the Grand Concourse and Tremont Avenue. However, the #4 train is more than a half-mile from the Metro-North station, and the B/D line is more than one and a half miles away. Significant grade changes between the station area and the upland community make the prospect of walking directly to these transit lines unlikely. The portion of the community west of Major Deegan is therefore highly reliant on the bus and commutes can often involve multiple modes of transit. Automobile ownership rates are lower than other portions of the Bronx and the City as whole.

CHALLENGES & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Morris Heights Metro-North station is located on a small prolongation of West Tremont Avenue that also serves as an overpass over the Major Deegan Expressway and connector to Roberto Clemente State Park and River Park Towers. Pedestrian connection to the station is unpleasant, as the overpass is largely unshielded, is poorly lit, and provides no streetscape amenities. PS 230, which fronts the overpass across from the station is separated from street level and has little transparency facing the street.

Beyond the West Tremont Ave overpass, access to station from the upland neighborhood faces similar challenges. The lowland area of the neighborhood to the west is largely cut off from the upland neighborhood of Morris Heights due to a variety of factors that include the Major Deegan Expressway and the Metro-North rail corridor, and significant grade changes. In addition to these issues, the separation between the neighborhoods is exacerbated by the poor pedestrian environment between them. The primary streets which connect these areas, including Cedar Avenue, the step street along West Tremont Avenue, and parts of Sedgwick Avenue, lack pedestrian amenities that would ideally serve as the connective tissue between these neighborhoods. Without them, these streets further isolate the area west of the station from the surrounding community and its resources.

Currently there is a lack of commercial services in the area for residents and visitors to the park. Active retail, service and entertainment establishments, in addition to meeting the everyday needs of residents and visitors bring activity to the streets. Shoppers going in and out of stores, ambient light shining on the street in the evening, lend a healthy vibrancy and security to the street.

There is also a lack of streetscape amenities such as street trees, pedestrian lighting, benches and well demarcated bus stops. This coupled with the lack of retail makes pedestrian navigation around the neighborhood very difficult. The pedestrian environment is further degraded by features such as the Major Deegan Expressway, which limits development, and even a sidewalk, along the west side of Cedar Ave. Lack of pedestrian amenities makes connections between the community west of the Deegan and the community east very poor. Bus service lacks

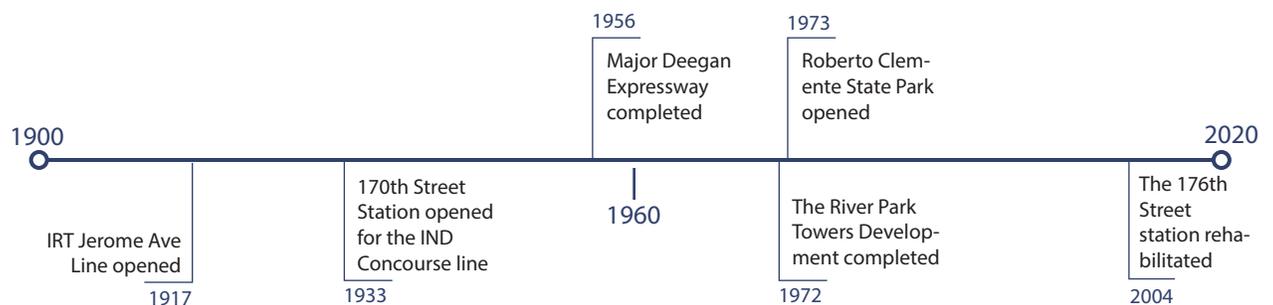


FIGURE 2 | Morris Heights Neighborhood timeline.

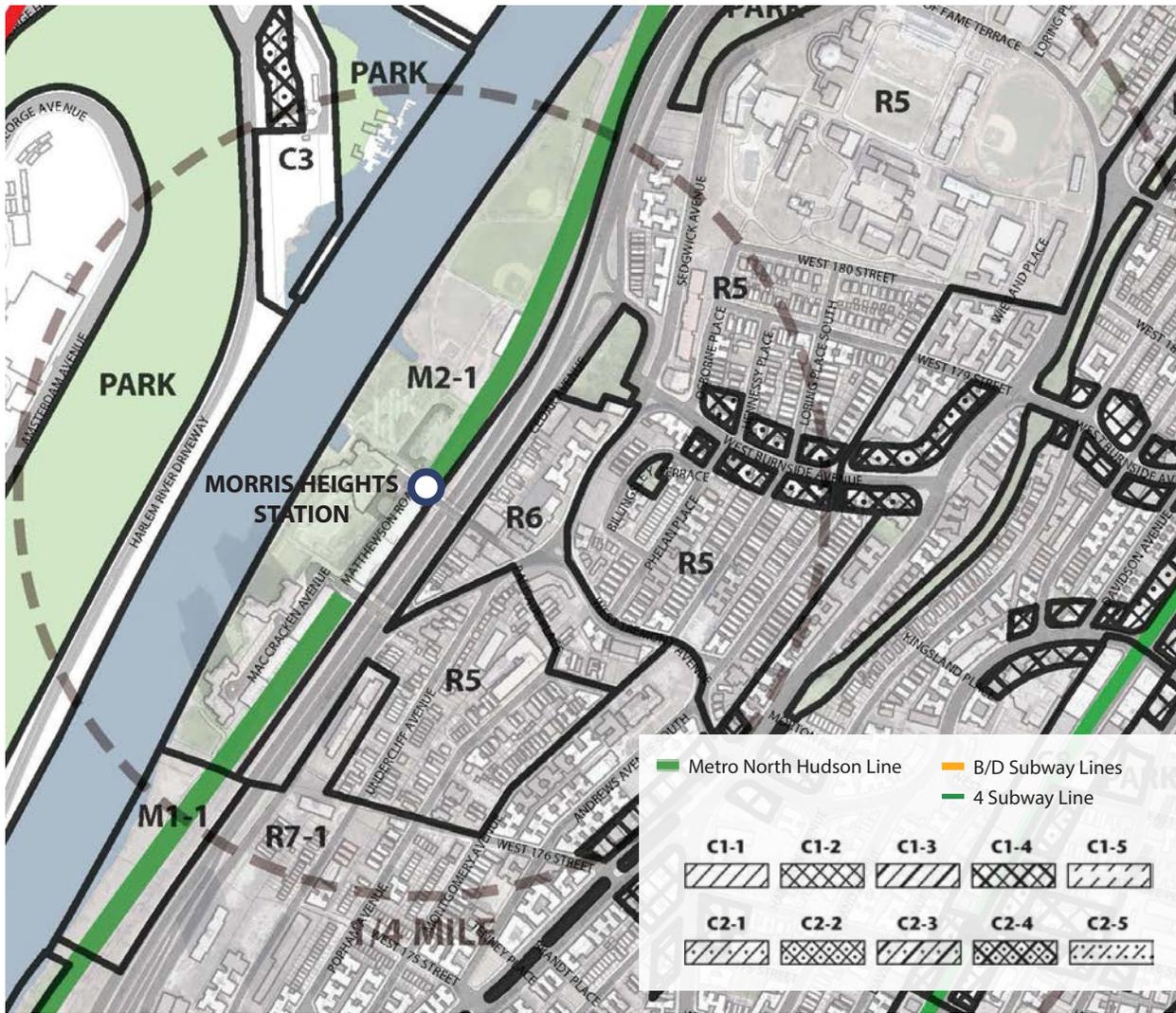


FIGURE 3 | (Top) Zoning around the Morris Heights station area; the waterfront area is largely zoned for manufacturing uses, with the surrounding areas predominately zoned as residential. This currently limits commercial uses, and local economic activity.

FIGURE 4 | (Bottom) Cedar Avenue and West Tremont Avenue; ground floor uses are largely inactive with little commercial development and foot-traffic around the station entrance.



amenities, such as benches, lighting and shelters and the Metro-North station has very low ridership, which provides no incentive for increased service or investment.

River Park Towers could serve as a sustainable Transit Oriented Development as was perhaps envisioned during its planning. It is adjacent to commuter rail and located within a regional recreation area. It includes its own commercial uses located on the ground floor of its own parking as well as a K-5 public school. However, the result has been far from what was intended. The aforementioned pedestrian challenges isolate the development from the surrounding neighborhood and services. Its isolation has been detrimental to the residents, park usage, Metro-North ridership and the surrounding land uses.

Ongoing efforts by Roberto Clemente State Park and the Harlem River Working Group coupled with the reopening of Highbridge Park present an opportunity to rethink the area, especially since Roberto Clemente State Park is currently one of the few public access points to the Bronx side of the Harlem River. The Harlem River Greenway Vision Plan recommends making Roberto Clemente State Park the premier gateway to the river and Greenway, and proposes improved signage, a bike path, increased access to the water, improved programming, and the implementation of storm water capture devices. Roberto Clemente State Park is currently in the process of designing entranceway enhancements and has identified the intersection of Cedar Avenue and West Tremont Avenue as a key entranceway to the park. The Highbridge is a pedestrian access point across the Harlem River a 157th Street. It has been closed

since the 1970's and is scheduled to re-open in the Winter of 2014.

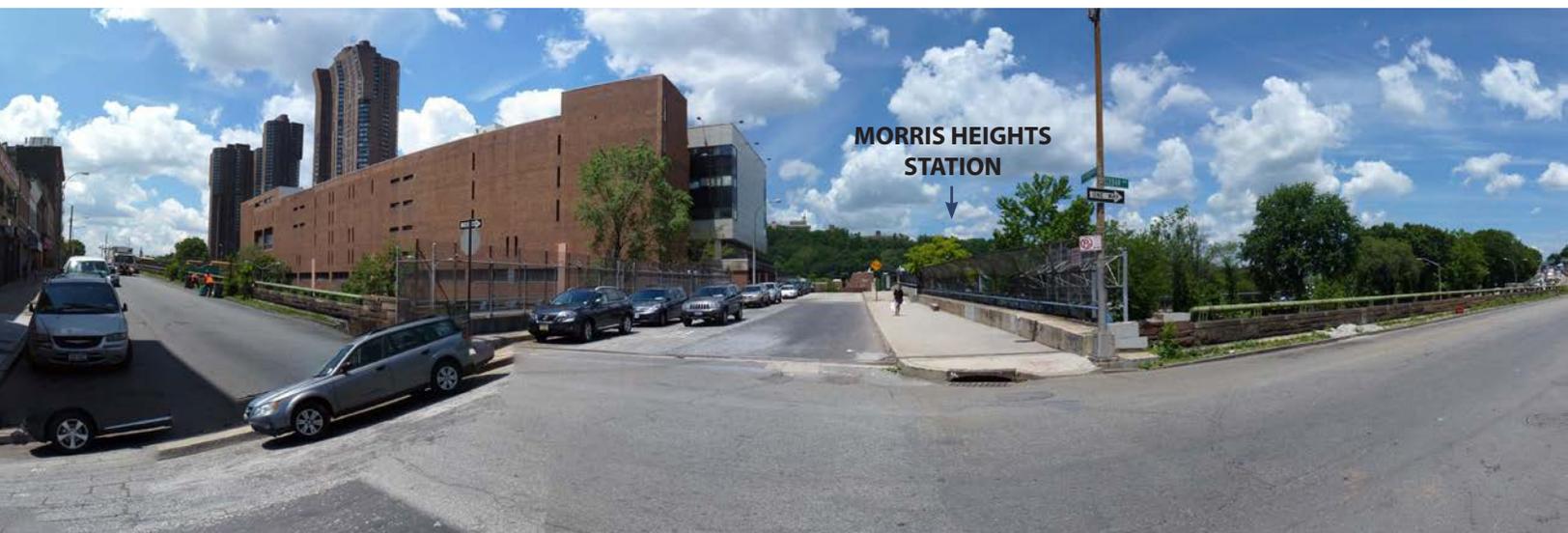
As part of this effort DCP coordinated closely with the Harlem River Working Group and Roberto Clemente State Park to identify priorities and depict the application of best practices. These improvements are intended to enhance connectivity and support pedestrian activity.

The following recommendations are focused on access improvements to the station area along West Tremont Avenue, and improvements to Cedar Avenue. There are two key access points to the Park and the residential community from Cedar Avenue: one at the intersection of Sedgwick Avenue with the overpass over the Major Deegan Expressway; and the second at the intersection of West Tremont Avenue. East of the intersection, West Tremont Avenue becomes a step street to connect to Sedgwick Ave above. DCP chose to show an application of TOD Best Practices using West Tremont Avenue since the main entrance to RCSP and the Metro North station are located here. However, many of these same principles can be applied to the intersection of Sedgwick and Cedar.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Figure 4 shows the current state of West Tremont Avenue as it crosses Cedar Avenue looking east from the station entrance. The following issues were identified during the planning process:

- Cedar Avenue is currently underdeveloped. Current land uses on Cedar include parking lots, a mix of two to six story commercial, residential



EXISTING CONDITIONS



FIGURE 4 | Existing Conditions at Cedar Avenue and West Tremont Avenue

Figure 4 Existing Conditions

- ① Inconsistent base heights, setback, and building heights
- ② Inactive ground-floor uses; currently commercial uses are not allowed
- ③ Isolated and underutilized stepstreet
- ④ Dead-end street is open to vehicular usage, limiting the area as public space
- ⑤ Uninviting entranceway to Roberto Clemente Park over the Major Deegan Expressway

and light industrial. The blocks just east of the station along Cedar Avenue are currently zoned as an R6 Residence District, which only permits residential and community facility uses. This Residence District does not permit commercial uses and does not mandate that the height and scale of new buildings align with the surrounding context. Current commercial and light manufacturing uses located there are non-conforming and are grandfathered, and many buildings have blank walls on the ground floor, offering no pedestrian activity or security. Without changing the zoning, new development would be limited to residential or community facility uses,

and the form would not be predictable. Numerous curb cuts, inactive uses, blank walls, narrow sidewalks and a lack of sidewalk amenities like street trees, benches, and lighting discourage pedestrian activity.

- Since Cedar Avenue runs parallel to the Major Deegan Expressway, vehicles tend to travel in excess of posted speed limits. There is no stop sign or traffic light at the West Tremont Avenue intersection, and pedestrian crossing is difficult and even dangerous.
- The West Tremont Avenue step streets are in a



FIGURE 5 | Potential Improvements at Cedar Avenue and West Tremont Avenue

Figure 5 Potential Improvements

- ① Develop contextual maximum base heights and, after setback, maximum building heights
- ② Permit commercial uses so that ground floors are able to provide more active uses
- ③ Refurbish step street and incorporate artwork along pathway from the community to the park to make a more inviting gateway
- ④ Close dead end street to vehicular usage to allow for pedestrian and commercial activity
- ⑤ Hide the expressway below with a more decorative screen which incorporates planting, seating and street lamps.

state of disrepair, are poorly lit, and have few active uses in the immediate vicinity. All of this combines to create an unsafe perception and discourage its use.

- The West Tremont Avenue overpass, which provides access to the station and park, has no lighting or other street amenities to invite pedestrians, and the noise associated with the Major Deegan Expressway below is poorly screened.
- Residential uses are not necessarily desirable at the ground floor level, especially where the building is fronting upon the highway, so in the absence of a commercial overlay, ground floors

are prone to have blank walls and security grills on windows. Inactive uses combined with a lack of lighting re-enforce an environment that is perceived as unsafe.

Figure 5 identifies potential improvements that promote West Tremont as an inviting entranceway to the RCSP, the Metro-North Station. These improvements are numerically identified as:

- ① Apply contextual zoning to the area to establish predictability and an appropriate scale to future development in the area. Contextual zoning districts typically allow slightly more development rights, higher lot coverage and prescribe maxi-

EXISTING CONDITIONS



POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS

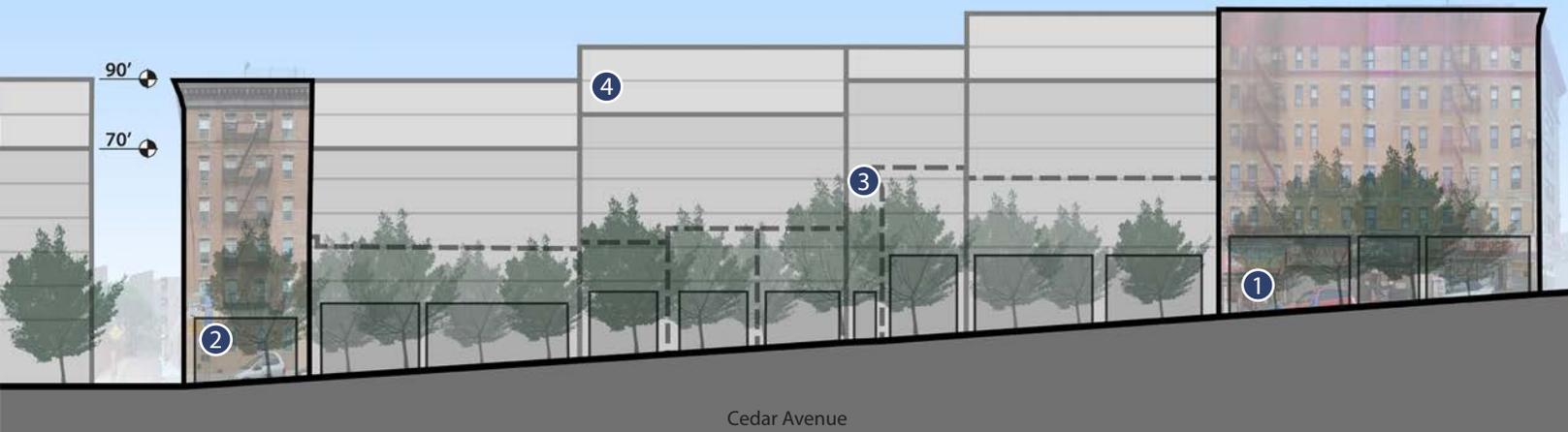


FIGURE 6 | (Top) Existing Conditions along Cedar Avenue. (Bottom) Proposed Improvements along Cedar Avenue.

Figure 6 Existing Conditions

- ① Currently zoned as a residence district. Commercial and manufacturing uses are non-conforming.
- ② Curb cuts disrupt continuous pedestrian clear path.
- ③ Inconsistent building heights.
- ④ Large expanses of blank walls on ground floor.

Figure 6 Potential Improvements

- ① Explore mapping a commercial overlay onto Cedar Ave to bring commercial uses into conformance.
- ② Permitting commercial uses will bring larger amounts of transparency and active uses. This will support station and park usage.
- ③ Add street trees at regular intervals. Eliminate curb cuts.
- ④ Explore contextualizing the residence district to establish maximum base heights, and after setback, maximum building heights.

mum base heights and, after setback, maximum building heights.

- 2 Add a commercial overlay along Cedar Avenue to permit commercial uses on the ground floors. This will bring existing commercial uses, mostly neighborhood retail, into compliance and allow this section of Cedar Avenue to develop as a supportive commercial corridor. Ground floor commercial uses will not only provide additional amenities to residents and visitors, it will all generate pedestrian activity and eyes on the street.
- 2 Contextual zoning along the corridor would require the provision of some streetscape amenities, like street trees, as new development occurs.
- 3 Refurbish step street and incorporate artwork into street-bed to make an inviting gateway to the park. This will create a key connection from the Harlem River to the upland community with attractive sightlines. Close dead end street to allow for more pedestrian activity to create a comfortable space that complements the park and station. For example, it would be an ideal location for a sidewalk café.
- 4 Implement measures to slow traffic along Cedar Avenue. Establishing safe pedestrian crossings along Cedar Avenue to encourage usage by park users, train riders and students.
- 5 Hide the expressway below with a more decorative fence which incorporates planting, seating and street lamps. A continuous theme will lead users to the station and park while providing a space to relax.

CONCLUSION

The combination of all of these recommendations would allow Cedar Avenue to develop as a commercial and pedestrian corridor that better supports the surrounding uses.

The area around the Morris Heights station has the potential to be a sustainable transit oriented neighborhood. The commuter rail, regional park and high density housing are important assets for the area. An improved pedestrian environment, including lighting, street trees, benches and bus shelters along with additional local retail would enhance access to the station, park and residential west of the rail line.

Recent investments at Roberto Clemente State Park; an effort to create a continuous greenway along the Harlem River and increase public access to the waterfront, and the reopening of the Highbridge provide an opportunity to further connect this area. The recommendations identified in this section are intended to complement existing efforts to enhance access, increase pedestrian activity and maximize the station and park as an asset to the community.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

- Enhance pedestrian pathways that cross Cedar Avenue at W. Tremont and Sedgwick Avenues to reconnect amenities to the surrounding community.
- Study zoning along Cedar Avenue to promote a mixed used commercial corridor that supports residents, commuters and park patrons.
- Develop pedestrian infrastructure to increase activity to promote usage of the station and park.