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Welfare Island: A Good Idea Gone Awry

To the Editor:

Both The Times' editorial about what is now to be called Roosevelt Island (July 19) and the letter from Thomas Morgan of the Mayor's office (July 25) evidently assume that all New Yorkers enjoy "enthusiastic expectations for the future of Welfare Island."

Well, this New Yorker, for one, does not.

Recently I worked for six months at the Welfare Island Development Corporation and was able to observe at close hand the way the development was going. The sad fact is that the original plan, put together with sensitivity and imagination by the Lindsay-appointed group and its architect, Philip Johnson, has been subtly changed by the Urban Development Corporation—and very much for the worse.

The original plan was an honorable compromise between two positions, for both of which there were passionate advocates: (1) that the island should become a great urban park and (2) that the land, being too valuable to leave alone, should in view of the city's urgent need for it be fully covered with housing.

The solution to this conflict, accepted by all concerned, was to pro-

vide for dense, concentrated building in the middle of the island—full of the interest and vitality that we hope to find in cities—and to turn all the rest (except for existing hospitals and landmark structures) over to open park land.

Alas, it isn't going to be like that. In the last few years a terrible slippage has occurred. The age-old American mixture of soaring costs, dwindling resources, lack of understanding, poor judgment, incompetence and arrogance in high places has done its sorry and inevitable work, here as in other areas of national life.

What is going up now on Welfare Island is the first stage of an architectural hodgepodge from which urban quality, open space and design integrity have been in large measure lost.

The Times' own perceptive and wise Ada Louise Huxtable viewed this very situation with alarm as far back as the spring of 1971. She wrote on May 23 of that year: "The original Welfare Island plan by Philip Johnson is being tragically ended; it is hard to tell whether from disinterest or default. . . . It is better to honestly scrap a plan than to mutilate it in this fashion."

Why is no one paying attention?

JOAN K. DAVIDSON
New York, July 25, 1973