THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10007

September 18, 1973

Dear Friend:

On August 20th, I signed legislation to change the name of a 147-acre island in New York City's East River from Welfare Island to Franklin D. Roosevelt Island. The formal dedication will be held on Monday, September 24, which will be proclaimed Franklin D. Roosevelt Island Day, in ceremonies that will include the unveiling of the official model of the Four Freedoms Foundation Monument to President Roosevelt. This will be an important event in the life of our City and an historic day for those who have long sought an appropriate monument to President Roosevelt.

This extraordinary island, which has been neglected for almost a century, is now being developed as a new town to house 20,000 New Yorkers in a carefully designed and integrated modern urban environment that emphasizes its river setting and includes a complete ban on private cars. The Four Freedoms Monument will stand at the southern tip of the island, almost directly across from the United Nations building.

Governor Averell Harriman is Honorary Chairman of a special committee of distinguished Americans who are sponsoring the day's program.

It is my pleasure to invite you to join with me and the Committee in this dedication. At 10:30 A.M. on Monday, September 24, a boat will depart from Gracie Mansion (88th Street and East End Avenue) for a short cruise around the island to view the development plan. The boat will dock and the dedication ceremony will take place on the site where the Monument will be erected. Buses will then return all guests to Gracie Mansion for a buffet luncheon at 1:00 P.M.

I hope you will join us for this historic event. Please confirm as soon as possible by calling 212-566-2946.

Sincerely,

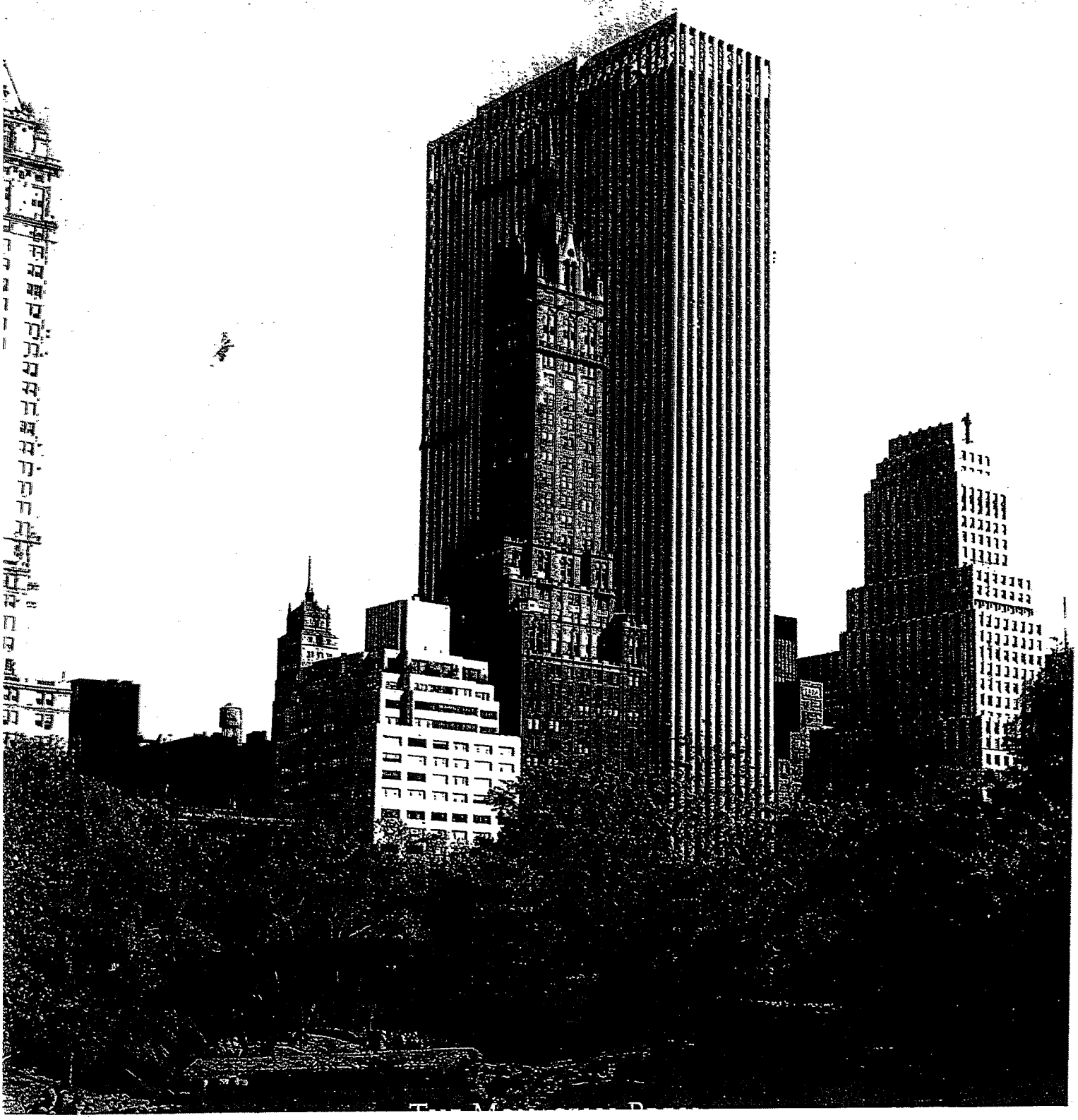
John V. Lindsay

John V. Lindsay
MAYOR

NEW YORK 1960

ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM BETWEEN THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE BICENTENNIAL

ROBERT A. M. STERN • THOMAS MELLINS • DAVID FISHMAN



Chapter 8

Roosevelt Island

I can't think of a more exciting site for a new town anywhere in this country. If we botch this one, we might as well give up on urban design altogether.
—Peter Blake, 1969[1]

The development of Roosevelt Island, a 147-acre island lying 300 yards off Manhattan's shore in the East River between Fiftieth and Eighty-sixth streets, as a "new town," complete with extensive housing, stores, schools, a church and numerous public amenities, was one of the city's most self-conscious, serious postwar efforts to make a significant contribution to urbanism.[2] Two miles long and 800 feet wide at its widest point, the small island had an extraordinary history. It was called Minnahanonck by the Indians, Varcken (Hog) Eylandt by the Dutch and Ferkens or Perkens Island by the English. Later it was called Manning's Island when it was owned by Captain John Manning, the commander of British forces who tamely surrendered New Netherlands to the attacking Dutch in 1673, for which he was court-martialed and publicly disgraced. As Blackwell's Island—Robert Blackwell was Manning's heir—it became a convenient yet out-of-view depot for the city's poor, infirm and insane. It would retain this name for over two centuries, until 1921, when it became Welfare Island, which was changed to Roosevelt fifty-two years later.

When Philip Hone, former mayor and famous diarist of early-nineteenth-century New York, visited the island in 1828 he was impressed by the quality of the building stone it could supply for the penitentiary the city proposed to construct there. Soon after, the city paid $32,000 for the island, where in 1834 prisoners began to be housed. Charles Dickens visited its insane asylum in 1842, finding "a lounging, listless madhouse air which was very painful."[3] In 1872 a fifty-foot-tall lighthouse at the island's northern tip was reputedly built by John McCarthy, a purportedly insane inmate who worked under the supervision of architect James Renwick, Jr.

In 1907 the final report of the New York City Improvement Commission proposed that Blackwell's Island be transformed into a park, but nothing came of this plan.[4] Nine years later two truck-sized elevators were built to carry traffic down to the island from the Queensboro Bridge, supplementing ferry service that left from the foot of East Seventy-eighth Street in Manhattan. No direct connection was built to the island until 1955, when the New York City Department of Public Works completed the Welfare Island Bridge, a liftbridge constructed across the east channel to Vernon Boulevard and Thirty-sixth Avenue in Long Island City.[5] Two years later the last active trolley-car line in New York City, which had traversed the Queensboro Bridge and stopped at the island's elevator, ceased operating.[6]

The island continued to be home to the sick, and new hospitals were built to supplement and ultimately replace the increasingly outmoded nineteenth-century facilities. At the southern end of the island, Isadore Rosenfield's Goldwater Memorial Hospital, originally called Welfare Hospital for Chronic Diseases, was completed in 1939 and added on to in 1971; at the northern end stood the Bird S. Coler Hospital, a 1,890-bed facility for the chronically ill, designed in the 1930s but delayed by World War II and not completed until 1952–54.[7] But the new, well-lit hospitals could not overcome the "air of gloom" that hung about the island, which, as William Robbins wrote in the *New York Times*, seemed to be "a reminder of a wretched past, its abandoned buildings reminiscent of the miserable souls that have peopled it."[8] The ninety abandoned buildings that stood on the island served no larger purpose than to provide students at the city fire fighter's school with a place to set fires and practice putting them out.

In 1961 an elaborate plan was released for the conversion of Welfare Island into a community of 70,000 people, equal in population to New Rochelle, New York, or East Orange, New Jersey.[9] The plan was put together by architect Victor Gruen, industrialist Frederick W. Richmond and Roger L. Stevens, a real estate promoter and theatrical producer, who collectively formed the East Island Development Corporation to develop the island, which they proposed to rename East Island. The syndicate had been orchestrated by Richmond, who first conceived of the development in 1960 while gazing out from his Sutton Place apart-

Eastwood, Roosevelt Island. Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976. View to the north from Blackwell Park. Rosenthal. SJA

ment at the spectacularly located but underutilized piece of real estate. City officials were kept informed of the plan as it evolved, but when it was released to the public in May 1961, they exhibited only cautious optimism for its success, recognizing the problems posed by the island's comparative inaccessibility as well as those associated with turning over so much land to one developer.

Gruen's plan called for the construction of a platform twenty-two feet above ground level, covering nearly the entire island and incorporating schools, shops and other public facilities, all connected by an air-conditioned pedestrian concourse. Slab and serpentine-shaped apartment buildings ranging in height from eight to fifty stories and containing a total of 20,000 units were to sit on top of the platform. To complement the existing hospitals, which were to remain on the island, Gruen proposed two large apartment buildings near the Coler Hospital to accommodate ambulatory elderly patients, thereby freeing up valuable hospital bed space. Private automobiles were to be banned from the island, which would be served by a conveyor-like system of cars running under the platform and along the island's length, stopping every 900 feet—in effect a system similar to that proposed for the Forty-second Street shuttle in 1951 (see chapter 2). Transportation to the mainland was to be provided by improved service on the existing elevators that ran from the island to the roadway of the Queensboro Bridge, by the lift-bridge leading to Queens, by ferry to various Manhattan landings and by the construction of a new station on the IND subway line, which ran under the island near its southern tip. Gruen touted his plan as "not just a big housing project" but "the first 20th century city." He explained: "We would really integrate housing with other facilities, avoiding the intermingling of transportation. It would mean unscrambling the melee of flesh and machine."[10]

But the plan failed to gain support, largely because high city officials were under growing pressure to consider the development of the island as a park, a proposal also supported by the editors of the *New York Times*, who argued: "Through the years Welfare Island has retained its pastoral tranquility more by virtue of inaccessibility than through enlightened planning. It is time to consider how this East River tract can best benefit the greatest number."[11] In addition, the park proposal was vigorously supported by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and the National Recreation Association as well as by various influential individuals like Lewis Mumford.[12]

The public announcement of Gruen's plan also elicited an angry response from the builder Francis J. Kleban, who two years earlier had presented to the City Planning Commission plans for what he called Sutton City, a smaller residential community on Welfare Island.[13] He had commissioned the architect William Lescaze, who devised a plan calling for four thirty-one-story apartment towers to be located south of the Queensboro Bridge and to contain a total of 2,400 units. Kleban asserted that Commissioner James Felt's response to the plan had been "unenthusiastic," and he demanded that his proposal be considered before Gruen's; whatever reconsideration his plan was given, the proposal was never realized.[14]

At the same time that Gruen was preparing his plan, a team of architecture students at Columbia University, working under the direction of Percival Goodman, developed a plan for the island based on Goodman's "Terrace City" concept, in which a platform for schools and shops was ringed by layers of terraced houses stepping back to a high central spine. The Columbia team proposed their city as a home for 20,000 United Nations employees. According to *Progressive Architecture*, "the towers-on-hills concept" of the Columbia design offered "a lively, open silhouette when viewed from across the river, as contrasted with the more 'developmenty' look of the East Island proposal."[15]

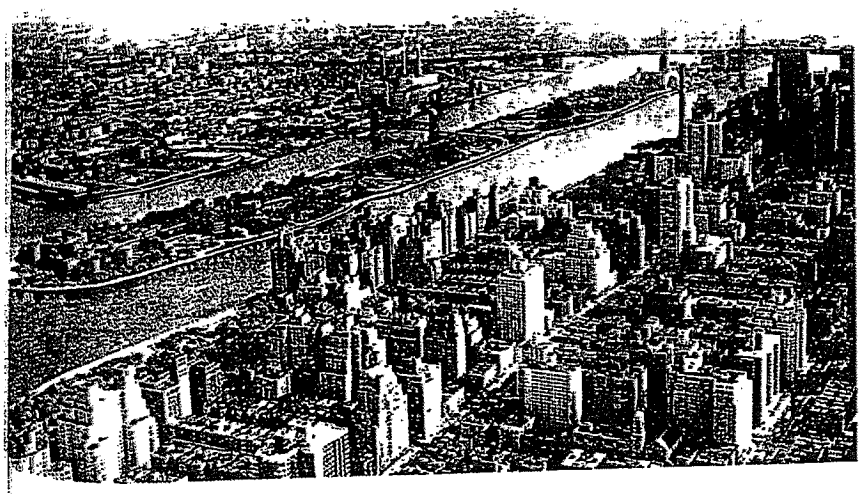
The city's decision in 1963 to construct a new subway tunnel that would cross Welfare Island just north of the Queensboro Bridge as it linked Manhattan and Queens revived interest in the island, stimulating plans for the construction of a building designed by Harrison & Abramovitz (1965) to house the United Nations International School on a seventeen-acre site at the island's southern tip, a prominent site clearly visible from the U.N. headquarters.[16] Parents of the school's students successfully blocked the plan, arguing that Welfare Island was not sufficiently accessible and, with its large infirm population, not an appropriate environment for children. Earlier, United Nations Secretary General U Thant had reluctantly approved a school site at the northeast corner of the headquarters' property, but the proposal had drawn criticism from U.N. personnel as well as nearby Beekman Place residents, including Laurance Rockefeller, who argued that a school would crowd the constricted tract. The City Planning Commission subsequently approved a proposal to build a school on a platform extending five hundred feet into the East River directly south of Davis, Brody & Associates' Waterside development.

In June 1966 Mayor John V. Lindsay announced the city's intentions to plan for Welfare Island's future, at first seeming to favor new housing for physicians and nurses, though other proposals being considered at the time included an educational campus, an exhibition center and low- or middle-income housing.[17] Most significant, Lindsay announced that the city had condemned forty-five dilapidated and unused hospital buildings. At a "clean-up" ceremony on the island, Mary Lindsay, the mayor's wife, proposed that the island be called East River Island.

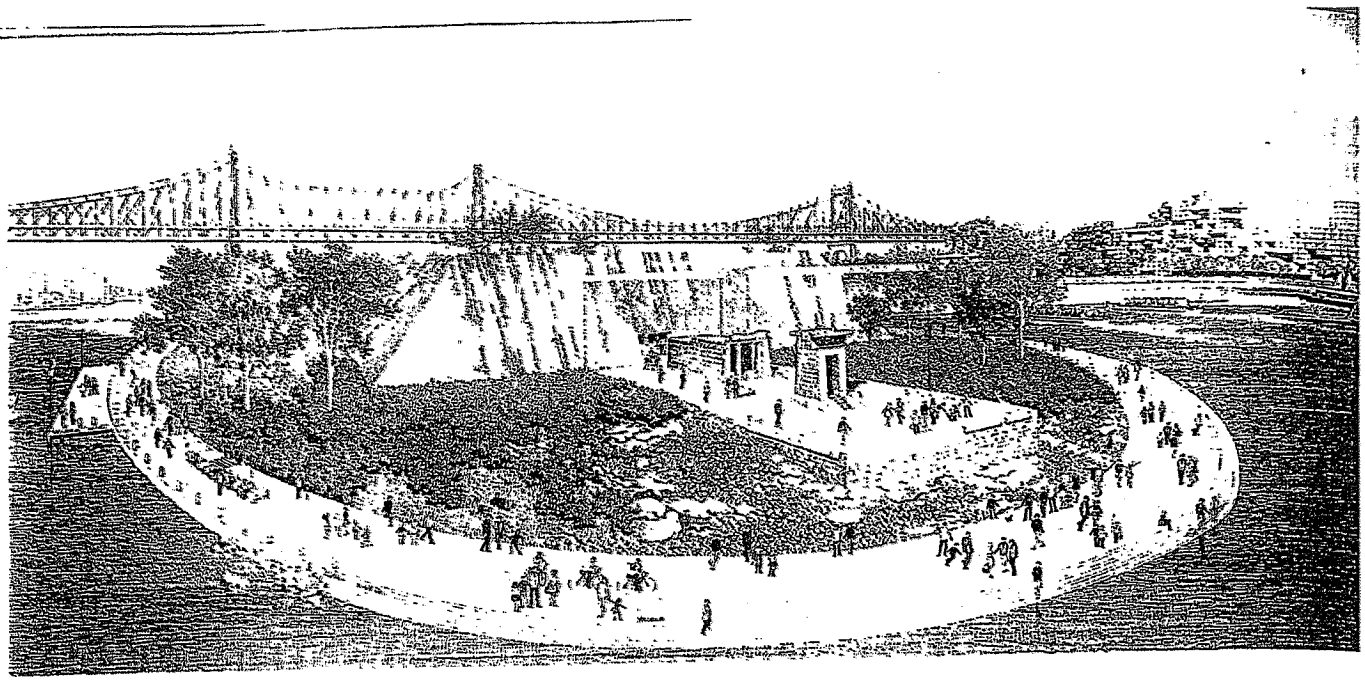
In February 1968 Lindsay appointed a twenty-two-member Welfare Island Planning and Development Committee, headed by Benno C. Schmidt, managing partner of the J. H. Whitney & Co. investment firm.[18] Other committee members included Mrs. Vincent Astor, William Bernbach, Ralph Bunche, Marcia Davenport, Philip Johnson, James Linen and Edward J. Logue, who would soon be appointed head of the newly established New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC). City officials serving on the committee were Bernard Bucove of the Department of Health Services Department, Donald Elliott of the City Planning Commission, August Heckscher of the Park Department and Jason Nathan of the Housing and Development Administration. A year later, in February 1969, the committee issued its report.

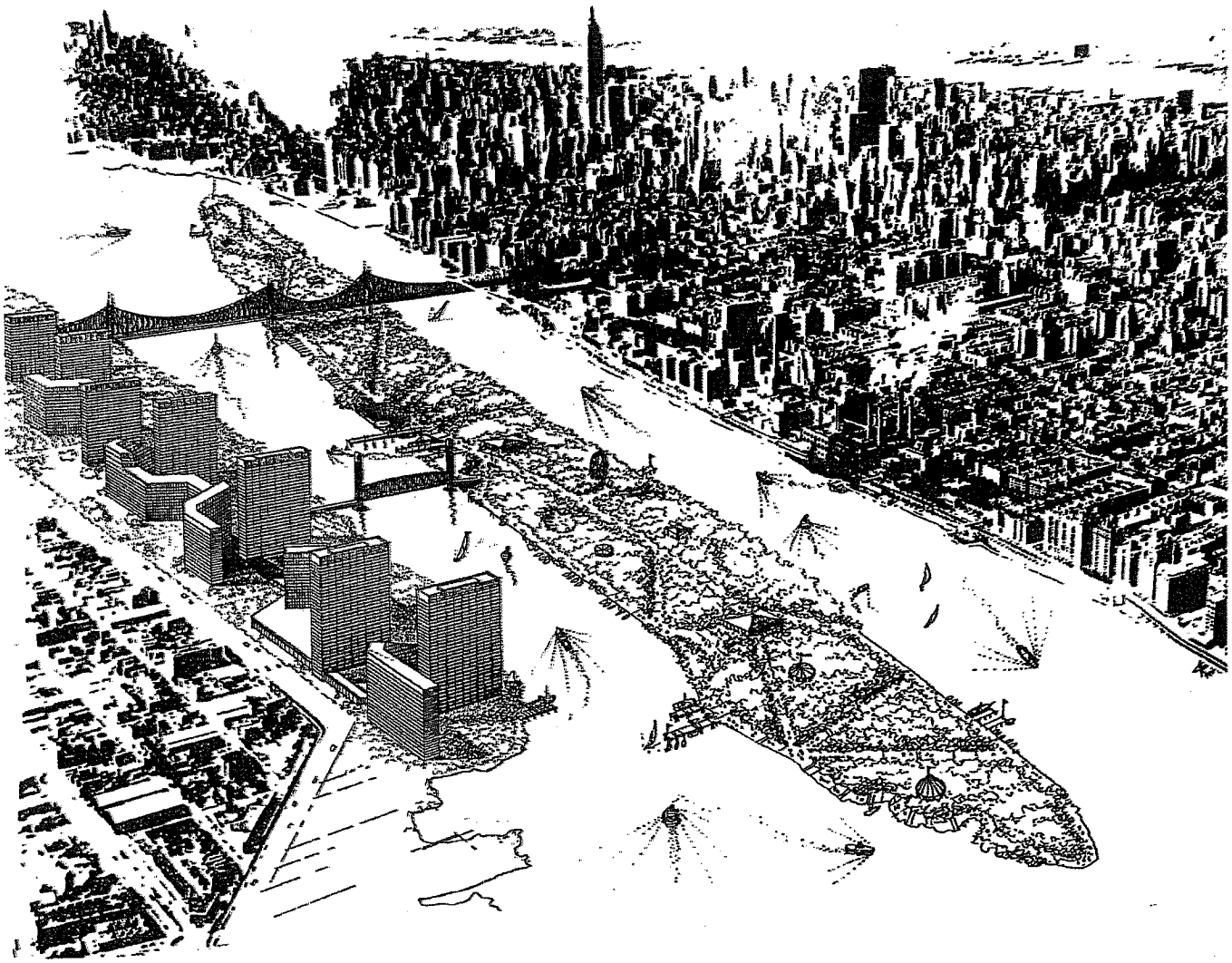
The 141-page document, written by Woody Tate, favored expanding the two hospitals to accommodate ambulatory patients and additional medical staff; it also advocated extensive park and recreational facilities, an improved sewage-disposal system and a subway station in the Sixty-third Street tunnel and recommended building enough housing "to achieve the minimum size required to justify community facilities, shopping, and services needed to support this resident community."[19] The report rejected large-scale housing as well as other exotic schemes that had been proposed, including casino gambling. The committee conspicuously ignored Consolidated Edison's request that nothing be proposed for the island's southern tip, where, opposite the United Nations headquarters, the utility company was thinking of building a nuclear power plant.[20] Other ideas suggested for the island but not commented on in the report

Above: East Island Proposal, Welfare Island. Victor Gruen, 1960. Photographic montage. View to the southwest *East Island*. CU



Left: View to the southeast showing Welfare Island, 1960 *Roosevelt Island Housing Competition*. UDC





Top: Proposal for museum of Egyptian art, Welfare Island. Zion & Breen, 1968. Rendering of view to the north, including Temple of Dendur and Egyptian museum. ZB

Bottom: Proposal for park, Welfare Island. Zion & Breen, 1965. Rendering of view to the southwest, including proposed housing on the Queens shoreline. ZB

were the recommendation made by Roger Starr of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council that the bodies interred in Queens and Brooklyn cemeteries be dug up and reburied on the island to make way for needed housing in those boroughs;[21] the proposal by futurist Herman Kahn that the island be linked to Manhattan and Queens with causeways and bisected by a canal to permit the river's continued use as a shipping corridor;[22] and a proposal presented by Robert Zion and Harold Breen calling for the placement of the Temple of Dendur adjacent to a museum of Egyptian art to be built at the island's southern end.[23] Zion & Breen also offered another proposal, to develop the island as a park reminiscent of Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen and relocate the housing Gruen had planned to underutilized land on the Queens shore. Accessible from midtown Manhattan by subway or high-speed water bus, the new park was to feature tree-lined promenades, cafés, small theaters and a new home for the New York Aquarium, located since 1957 in Coney Island after its removal from Battery Park.

On October 9, 1969, a week after the contract for construction of the Sixty-third Street tunnel was let, Philip Johnson and John Burgee's master plan for the island's development, based on the findings of Schmidt's committee, was released to the public at the opening of an exhibition, "The Island Nobody Knows," shown in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's galleries until October 23.[24] Noting previously rejected plans to devote the island exclusively to high-density housing, public parkland or industrial use, Johnson and Burgee called for a $200 million mixed-use development that would incorporate the existing hospitals while providing housing for 20,000 low- and moderate-income people in two separate automobile-free "island towns" (Northtown and Southtown), a twenty-five-acre ecological park that would reproduce the natural features of the region, a four-mile-long waterfront promenade and a 2,000-car garage called Motorgate. The project would not be undertaken by private developers but by the UDC, which would lease the land from the city in return for $1 million in the first year and an adjusted amount in ninety-nine subsequent years, after which the land and its improvements would return to the city. The agreement stipulated that construction begin within eighteen months, something the UDC, with sweeping powers that enabled it to bypass local codes and bureaucracies, could achieve. The project was to be completed in eight years.

In the exhibition catalogue Johnson and Burgee said that the island contained "some of the most charming, tree-lined, paved and bench equipped promenades west of the river Seine" and some of "the most spectacular views east or west of anywhere: panoramic views of Manhattan that remind you of Feininger's photographs; perspectives of a high-flying bridge that recall Piranesi's drawings; glimpses of docks and of industrial plants that look like Charles Sheeler's paintings at their most dramatic; and, finally, the movement of tugboats, of cars on the multilevel highways along the Manhattan waterfront, of seagulls and of helicopters above."[25] To preserve the island's natural amenities and avoid long, monotonous strips of buildings, Johnson and Burgee's plan divided the island latitudinally into nine zones: five parks and four building groups. The island towns, consisting of four- to twelve-story-tall apartment houses that included shops and public facilities, projected a believable and appealing image of medium-density urbanism, comparable to that of prewar Forest Hills or Kew Gardens in Queens.

The brick-clad buildings of Northtown clustered around the Motorgate; those in Southtown were gathered around a "town center," a glassed-in galleria, which Johnson and Burgee compared to the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan. The galleria connected a waterfront "town square" on the Manhattan side with a waterfront "harbor square" on the Queens side that embraced the East River with a series of steps leading down to the water's edge, which Johnson and Burgee compared to the Ghats of Benares on the Ganges. In addition to apartments, the plan provided for a 2,000-student public school, a day-care center, swimming pools, police and fire stations, a post office, 100,000 square feet of commercial space, 200,000 square feet of office space and a 300-room hotel. A north-south road called Main Street would run most of the island's length, with traffic restricted to emergency vehicles, minibuses and bicycles. "There are no cross streets," Johnson and Burgee said. "Instead, there are tree-lined pedestrian walks that lead between apartment houses to the river, east and west—first leading the eye one way, then shortly after, the other. The main attraction of this narrow island, after all, is that glimpses to its waterfronts are so dramatic."[26] In addition to retaining the two hospitals—a decision based on expediency since their replacement would be too costly—the plan called for the preservation of the island's landmark structures, including Blackwell House (1796–1804) and the romantically ruinated New York Lunatic Asylum (1839; additions, 1847–48, 1879), with its spectacular octagonal stair tower.

Ada Louise Huxtable was impressed with the plan, and with the exhibition of "The Island Nobody Knows," which she felt was "in the fine tradition of London's public display and discussion of planning projects that makes that city a peculiarly civilized place."[27] Peter Blake, writing in *New York* magazine, also greeted the plan with enthusiasm, though he added a somewhat fatalistic twist to his appraisal: "It is a nice plan for a very nice community, and if it doesn't get built, more or less in its proposed form, New York will have just about had it so far as better-quality housing is concerned." Blake went on to point out that there wasn't "anything fancy" about the proposal, explaining:

> The housing . . . is almost non-architectural and nondescript and deliberately so: brick buildings of no particular formal composition, that meander around courts open to the waterfronts, and step down from a maximum height of 14 stories along the Main Street "spine" of the island to a low four stories along its shores. As these nondescript buildings step down toward the water, they create roof terraces for apartments higher up, and offer views of the East River to all and sundry.[28]

"This is my Jane Jacobs period," said Johnson, defending his uncharacteristically low-key approach.[29] Blake interpreted this position as "straight Pop," but cautioned: "The only danger is that Pop Island could, under the pressure of economics, degenerate into Lefrak Island—unless Johnson and Burgee remain in control."[30]

The proposed project and lease arrangements sailed through a review by the Board of Estimate, which on October 29, 1969, gave its full support; Edward Logue, in his capacity as head of the UDC, immediately took charge.[31] To flesh out the skeletal master plan, Logue hired ten New York and Boston architects: Johnson and Burgee were brought back for the town center; Giorgio Cavaglieri was given responsibility for historic preservation; Gruzen & Partners for systems analysis; Kallmann & McKinnell for the Motorgate, which would also include shops, a fire station and a post office; and the firms of Conklin & Rossant, John M. Johansen, Sert, Jackson & Associates and Mitchell/Giurgola for 3,000 units of low-, middle- and high-income housing that would accommodate 12,000 people in the project's first stage. The landscape architects Dan Kiley &

Partners and Zion & Breen were hired to study the parks, streets and promenades, and the engineering firm Gibbs & Hill was retained to develop the island's infrastructure of services and transportation.

On October 6, 1970, a first interim report was presented in the form of a second exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the island's rehabilitation, featuring detailed designs for the buildings that would be built.[32] Like the Whitney Museum's survey of the UDC's work around the state, "Another Chance for Cities," this exhibition was timed to the upcoming gubernatorial election. Huxtable saw the project as the UDC's "showpiece and star performance," and the exhibition as much "more than a political event: it is a planning event of the first magnitude." She praised Johnson as "a late-blooming urbanist of notable sensibilities" who had created "a genuine urban environment in which the two elements consistently left out by the routine commercial developer are conspicuously present: the amenities of living through design." Noting that for the Boston Government Center Logue had hired I. M. Pei to produce a master plan and then had pursued a policy of "divide and conquer," parceling the buildings out to architects "who produced a full spectrum of humdrum to superior structures," Huxtable expressed her belief that for Welfare Island "any danger of chaos by coalition is offset by the kind of diversity that will prevent a 'project' look."[33]

In a second review of the Metropolitan exhibition, Huxtable expressed concern that "one of the plan's most felicitous features, the side views through to the water from the central, north-south main street, were lost, with the street turned into an almost solid wall of the highest buildings." But her major worry was that with each architect "conspicuously doing his own thing," the entire project might fall victim to "the purely practical matters of construction technology and economics [which] will ultimately determine whether any of this is built at all, the urbanistic esthetic and picturesque planning principles be damned." But, she mused, "That's New York."

Some architects, such as Conklin & Rossant, proposed a unique industrialized system of construction, an approach that Huxtable questioned, cautioning that such building techniques were usually more costly, required redesign and deflected attention from the basic task of providing good housing in a desirable setting: "The design answer will be found to be more commonality in such things as good, standardized apartments (just give everyone the best possible apartment and he will make his own kind of nest) and more attention to the relationships of views, walks, passageways, waterfront, public and private spaces and those things that create the amenities of environment."[34]

By May 1971 Huxtable was quite nervous about the island's future:

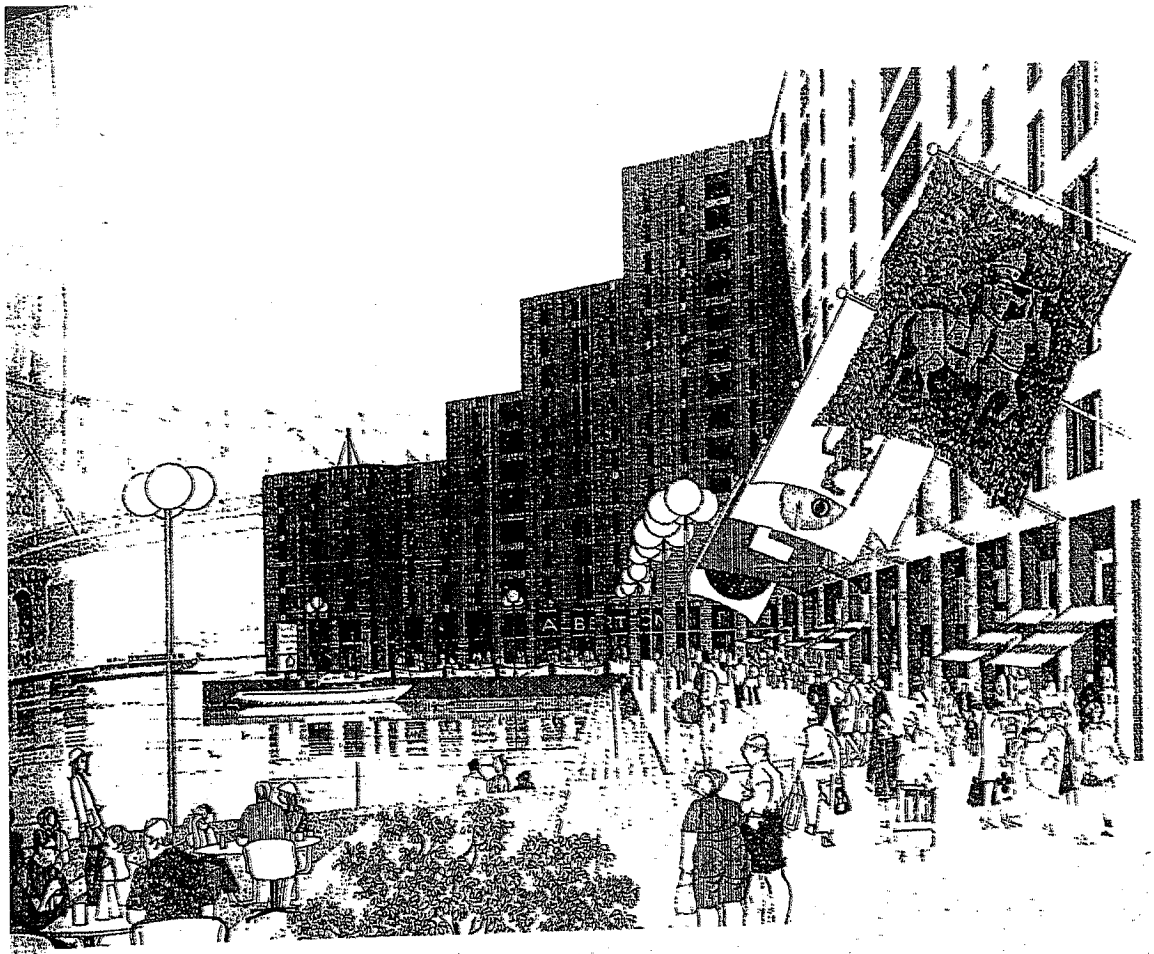
> The Welfare Island plan started out to be but no longer is . . . a coherent shaper and binder together of disparate elements into a recognizable urban idea. The original Welfare Island plan by Philip Johnson is being tragically eroded; it is hard to tell whether from disinterest or default. The idea—a schematic set of principles that emphasized a quality of island life in shared public views and spaces—is taking a beating from a team of architects who have not communicated meaningfully once they began work, with no conceptual control for the agency or for the master planner, who was immediately dropped from the job. It is better to honestly scrap a plan than to mutilate it in this fashion.[35]

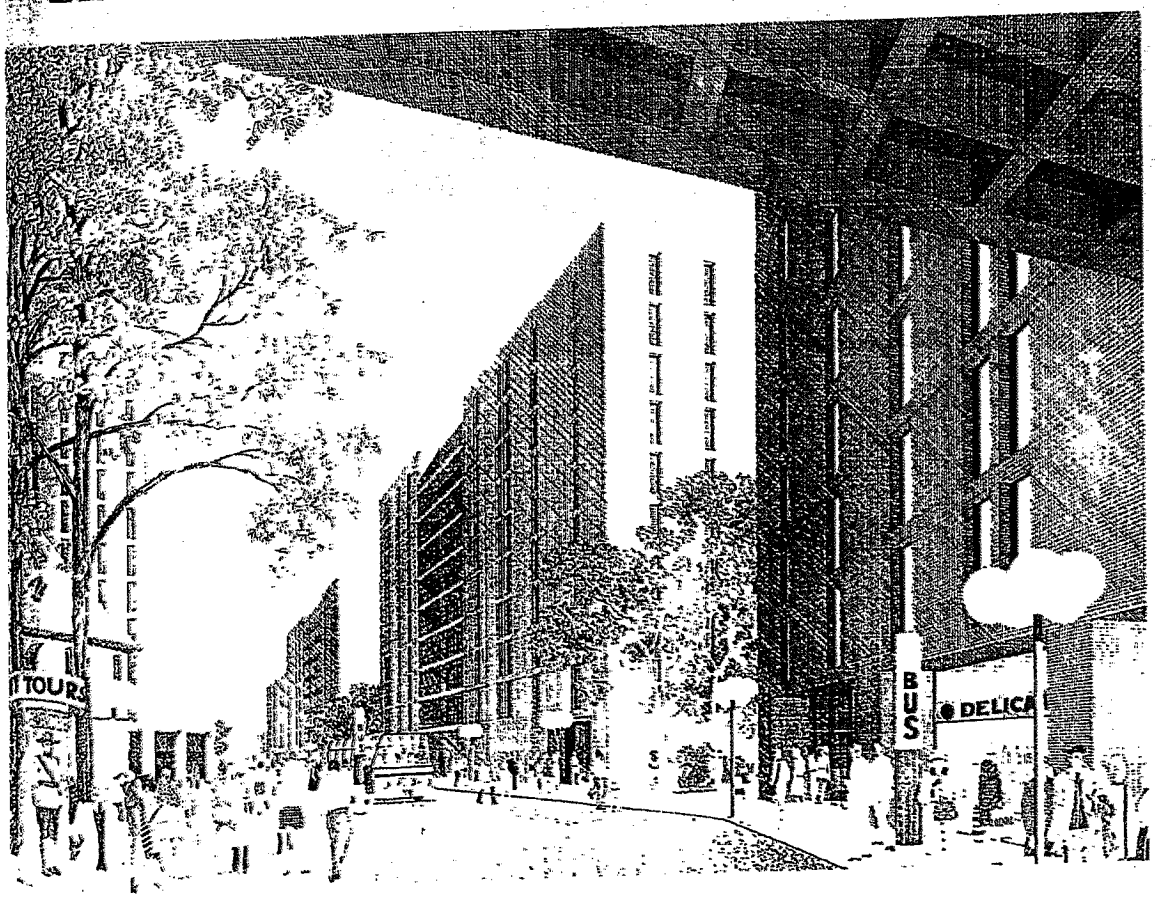
Though some observers contended that the problem was due in part to a strained relationship between Johnson and Logue, Johnson was particularly magnanimous in his evaluation of the situation. "I think they're all doing very well," Johnson stated. "Force of events, money and the actual conditions have caused them to make changes in my master plan, but they're following it as well as they can. Ed Logue's got fine architects working on the job, and Logue's a genius. He's the only person who could get this done."[36] Anthony Bailey, writing in the *New York Times*, described Logue's participation: "Logue is to be seen a least once a week plunging in his bearlike way around the site—old corduroys, green Shetland sweater, shirttail hanging out and no hard hat covering his stack of grey hair; slow-speaking, fast-thinking, a mixture of charm and combativeness, fussing about the color of tiles and asking awkward, provoking questions of his staff. He is proud of what he is doing on the island."[37]

Construction began in June 1971, with the first phase—calling for 300,000 square feet of commercial and office space, 3,000 units of housing, and streets, sewers and water lines—scheduled to take two years.[38] By the end of 1972, though the schedule had slipped, 2,138 apartment units were under construction in four apartment buildings in Southtown: Eastwood Apartments and Westview, designed by Sert, Jackson & Associates; and Rivercross Apartments and Island House, designed by John Johansen.[39] Direct responsibility for the project had been put in the hands of the Welfare Island Development Corporation, whose first director, Adam Yarmolinsky, departed in a personnel shake-up in February 1972. That same year the UDC's chief consultant, Richard Ravitch, a leading builder specializing in housing, also resigned; he believed the introduction of low-income tenants in 30 percent of the housing would undermine efforts to attract upper-income residential tenants as well as good commercial tenants. Delays in constructing the subway station, by 1972 estimated to open in 1979 or 1980, five years after the first tenants were to move in, was also a rising cause of concern. In addition, many observers continued to feel that Johnson and Burgee's original plan had been disastrously tampered with. As Steven Weisman reported in the *New York Times*: "To many critics, the river vistas were the most distinctive feature of the plan—the aspect that proved Philip Johnson a master at complementing the island environment. But Mr. Logue defends the changes that were made, and calls them slight. And by heightening the buildings, he says, he has permitted more residents than before to enjoy the view." But most of all, as Weisman reported, the criticism focused on the architectural changes, perhaps because Johnson "has not bothered to hide his chagrin at being dropped as the overall planner."[40]

In addition to problems of design, Welfare Island's growth continued to be stymied by political and economic problems. Not only did the staff of the Welfare Island Development Corporation change repeatedly, but many of the original architects had discontinued their associations with the project as well. By 1973 only Sert, Jackson & Associates and John Johansen, now in partnership with Ashok M. Bhavnani, were designing the housing in Southtown. Lawrence Halprin & Associates had been hired as landscape architects for the plaza, and Dan Kiley was at work on the park setting for Blackwell House. Johnson and Burgee and Zion & Breen were out, as were Conklin & Rossant and Mitchell/Giurgola.[41] Kallmann & McKinnell were still at work on the Motorgate, now downsized to accommodate only 1,000 cars, as well as the firehouse, post office and shops that were part of the original plan.

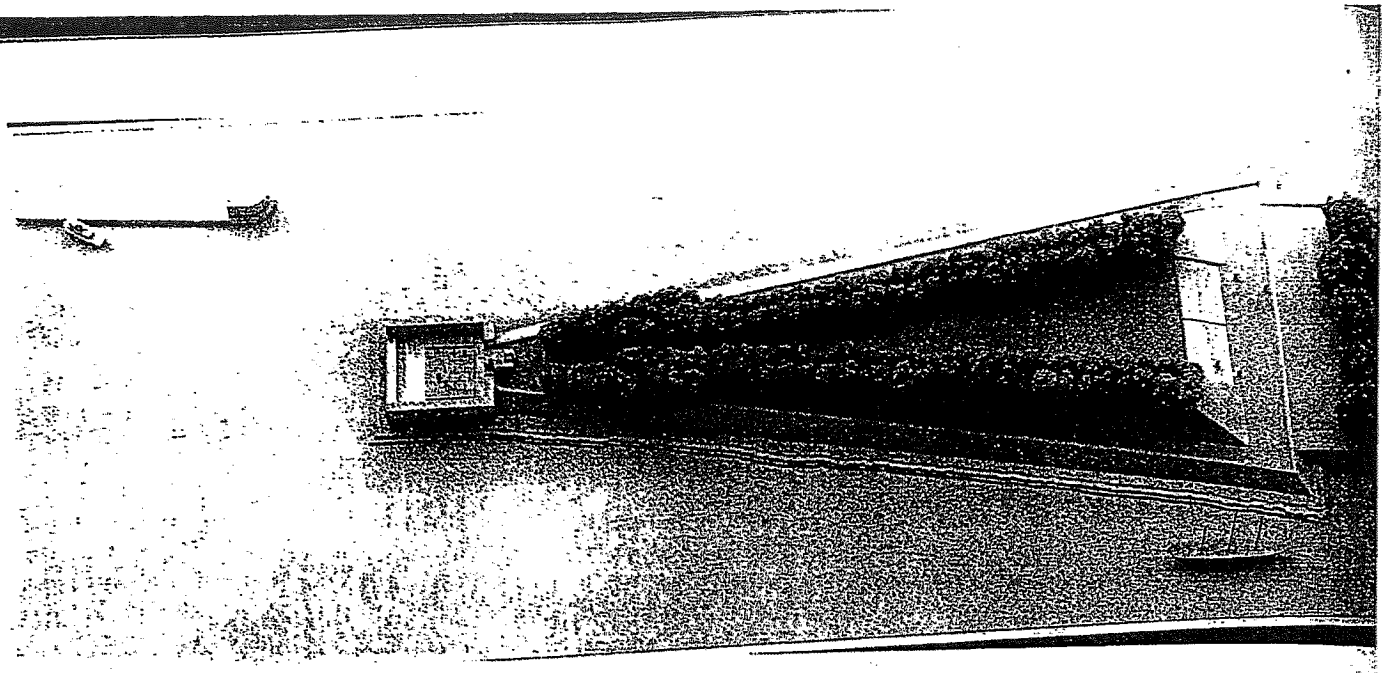
On August 20, 1973, amid the UDC's increasing staff problems and its inability to produce an affordable project, Welfare

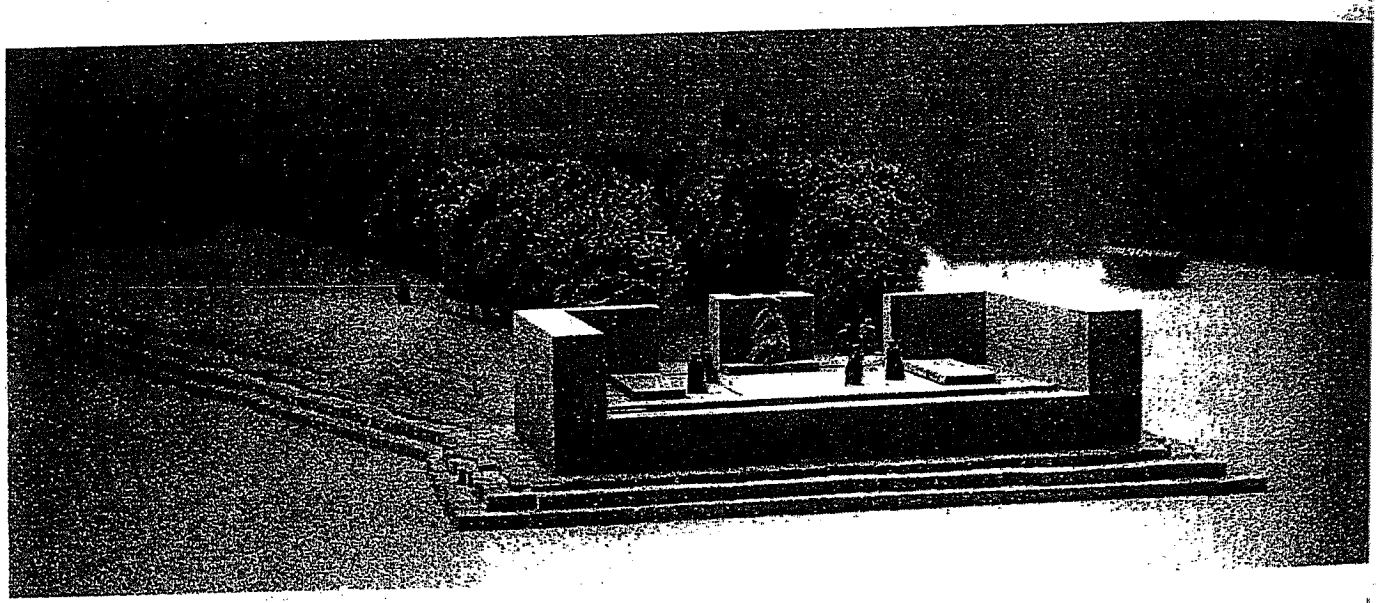




Top: Proposal for Welfare Island. Philip Johnson and John Burgee, 1969. Rendering by Ronald Love of proposed harbor. *The Island Nobody Knows*. CU

Bottom: Proposal for Welfare Island. Rendering by Ronald Love of proposed Main Street. *The Island Nobody Knows*. CU





Top: Proposal for Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, Roosevelt Island. Louis I. Kahn, 1974. Model. Aerial view. Pohl. LIK

Bottom: Proposal for Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial. Model. View to the north. Pohl. LIK

Island's name was changed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt Island at Mayor Lindsay's request.[42] At a ceremony marking the name change, held on September 24 and attended by members of the president's family, as well as by Mrs. Lindsay and the committee of distinguished sponsors of Franklin Delano Roosevelt Island Day, a model of the Four Freedoms Monument dedicated to FDR was unveiled.[43] Designed by the architect Louis I. Kahn, the memorial incorporated four sixty-foot-high stainless-steel pillars representing the "four freedoms" that Roosevelt had identified as the aims of World War II: freedom from want, freedom from fear, freedom of expression and freedom of worship. The design proved controversial, particularly because of its height. Early in 1974, before he died on March 17 at the age of seventy-four, Kahn prepared a second design, which was approved by the Roosevelt family. This design was publicly presented on April 25 at a dinner of the Four Freedoms Foundation, which was raising money to supplement the $2.2 million pledged by the state and the $2 million pledged by the city toward the realization of the $4.4 million project. Proposed for a location at the southern tip of the island on a 780-foot-long triangular site largely created out of fill from the Sixty-third Street subway tunnel, Kahn's Classically inspired design called for a subtly sloped park leading to a roofless "room." The fate of the 600-foot-high Delacorte Fountain (Pomerance & Breines, 1959), located just below the tip, was never resolved: the geyser, which the *New York Times* called "esthetic *juvenilia*" and money "literally down the drain," would presumably drown the memorial were it not for the fact that the vicissitudes of the East River—log-jammed waterways and careening tugboats—rendered the fountain inoperable much of the time anyway.[44]

In his design for the memorial, Kahn reduced his formal vocabulary to create what he called a "pre-Grecian temple space," framed with a virtually pure masonry architecture that defined a room, bounded by twelve-foot-high, medium gray granite walls on three sides; the roofless room opened to the south, looking down the river to the harbor.[45] A traditional bust of Roosevelt was to be placed facing north, greeting visitors; a more abstract sculpture was to be placed inside the room, where quotations from Roosevelt's writings were to be carved on the walls. In designing the memorial, Kahn created a spatial sequence that used the technique of forced perspective to concentrate the arriving visitor's attention on the bust of Roosevelt, and provided a vestibule for the austere memorial room and the sweeping view beyond.

Theodore Liebman, the Welfare Island Development Corporation's director of design, was obviously concerned about the fate of the design, given Kahn's death and the storm of controversy that surrounded two schemes for a Roosevelt memorial in Washington, D.C., one submitted in 1960 and one in 1966, both of which were rejected. Liebman said that Kahn "was pleased with his work—we're very fortunate that he lived long enough to see the design through to a stage he was satisfied with"—and that the memorial should be built "with complete integrity to Kahn's design." He added: "We're dealing with a piece of history."[46] The architect Michael Rubenstein, an associate at the firm of Mitchell/Giurgola, which took over the execution of the design following Kahn's death and prepared working drawings in association with the Philadelphia-based firm of David Wisdom Associates, viewed the proposed monument as a memorial to Kahn as well as to Roosevelt.

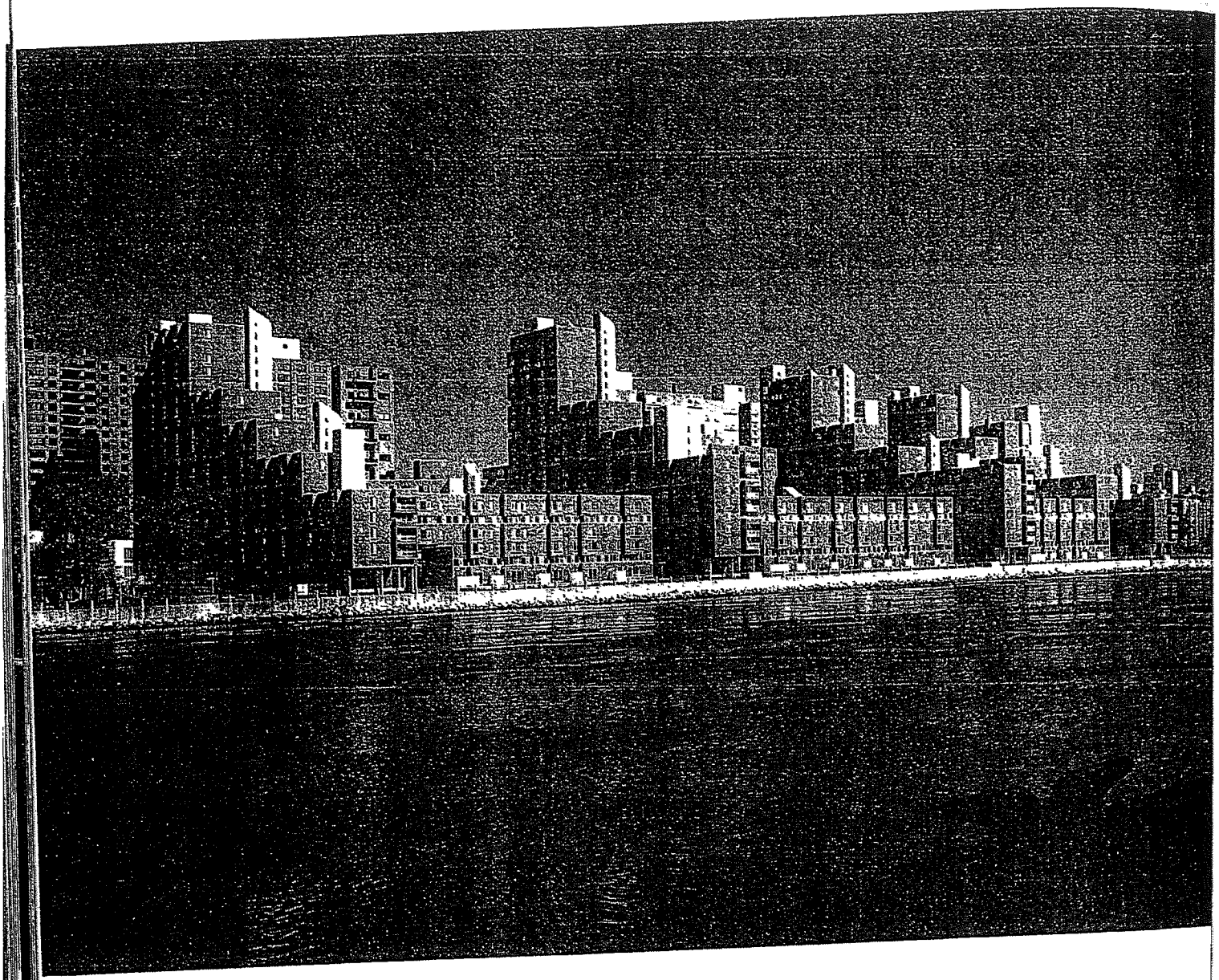
Thomas B. Hess, a passionately Modernist art critic who claimed friendship with Edward Logue and Louis Kahn and sympathy for Roosevelt, hated the design. In an open letter to Logue, which he published at the beginning of one of his regular *New York* art columns, Hess wrote: "Dear Ed, Please keep Lou's plans on the drawing board." He attacked the design as "a saddening astonishment," but put the blame neither on Logue nor on Kahn. "Kahn had pressed for another plan," Hess explained, "a highly architectural structure with a stately, if abstract, impact. But the Roosevelt family insisted that a bust of F.D.R. be included in his monument. This prerequisite caused all the grief. Kahn's solution was to propose an eclectic, almost parodic temple plan. . . . By opening the back wall, Kahn seems to make a wry comment on how the gods of modern civilization have gone public." Hess also disapproved of the use of granite, which, he said, "signifies brutal, centralized force, the dark magical omnipresence of the government and the demigods who command it and us." He continued:

> This is the sort of political edifice that the Italian fascists loved and Speer perfected for the glory of the Third Reich. . . . The site itself is treated heartlessly. What was a modest, picturesquely rugged shoreline has been disciplined to straight lines and symmetrical angles that have no significance beyond the alarming one of man's ability to impose a meaningless geometry on nature. The ultimate irony is that Roosevelt, who fought totalitarians to the death, is commemorated in the harsh style propagated by the dictators.[47]

Whatever the validity of Hess's criticism, the memorial remained unrealized not because of its perceived aesthetic shortcomings but because of a shortage of funds. As Martin Waldron reported in the *New York Times*, "A monument to the President who led the country out of the great Depression of the nineteen-thirties may become a victim of the recession of the seventies."[48] Acknowledging that the city could not afford to honor its initial pledge, municipal officials stated that $1.9 million were required in private donations. By October 1975 only $250,000 had been raised, and sufficient funds were not forthcoming. The rocky promontory remained, as Priscilla Tucker put it in *New York*, "a ragtag landscape of crumbling buildings, trees hemmed by underbrush, rubble, and wild flowers."[49]

In the late summer of 1974 eighty members of the Citizens' Housing and Planning Council toured Roosevelt Island, and they reported being impressed.[50] The pace of construction was frantic, with the UDC pushing for an opening of the entire first phase late in 1975.[51] At this point the architect Ulrich Franzen still favored the island's complete transformation into public parkland, though such a scheme was clearly more theoretical than practical.[52] At last, in April 1975, Roosevelt Island began to function as a town when thirty-four middle-income tenants moved into Johansen & Bhavnani's Island House, though the development still resembled an isolated island fortress more than a welcoming homestead.[53] Nonetheless, on June 24, 1975, Joseph P. Fried reported in the *New York Times* that "the inconveniences of being pioneer residents are relatively minor nuisances given the advantages they find";[54] and in November Richard F. Shepard wrote that there was "an extraordinarily upbeat mood among some of the newcomers."[55] But a stream of settlers was slow to materialize, partly due to the delayed completion of the tram (see below) and the subway stop and the initial lack of commercial facilities on the island. More important, however, were doubts about the UDC's financial viability, about the development's future should the agency collapse, and about the durability of the state's and city's commitment to maintaining an economically balanced community.

But as the buildings were completed, the public was at least reassured about one thing: the apartment buildings, if not ex-



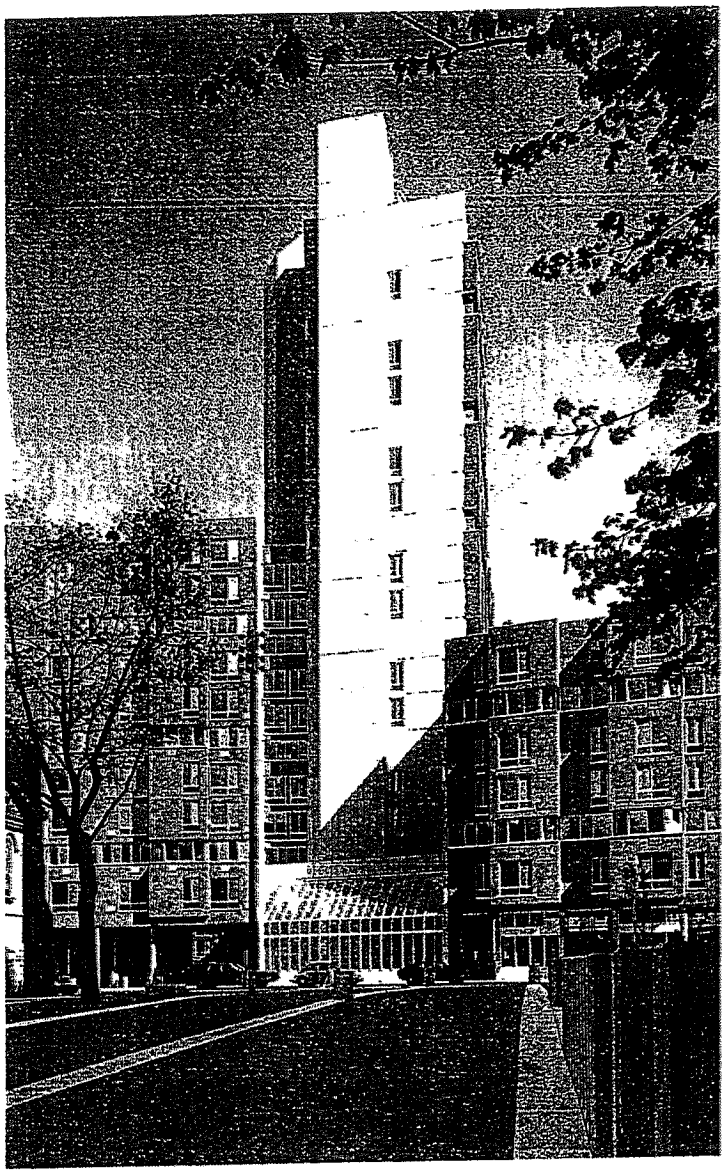
Eastwood Apartments, Roosevelt Island. Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976 View to the northwest. Rosenthal. SJA

tremely distinguished, were at least more successful as architecture than most built in the postwar era, and the level of accommodation they offered was more than adequate. In Southtown, Johansen & Bhavnani's middle- and upper-middle income Rivercross and Island House buildings enjoyed choice East River views.[56] Located opposite Manhattan's Rockefeller Institute, Rivercross's three reinforced-concrete-frame buildings, at 505, 513 and 541 Main Street, housed 850 families in all and were clad mostly in three-inch-thick dun-colored, cement-asbestos panels. The bland walls were given sculptural relief by the buildings' overall stepback massing, rising from the river to Main Street, and the punctuation of exposed painted vent pipes. The buildings, according to Johansen and Bhavnani, had an "unselfconscious industrial look," the only vestige of the UDC's initial desire to create a totally systems-built development.[57]

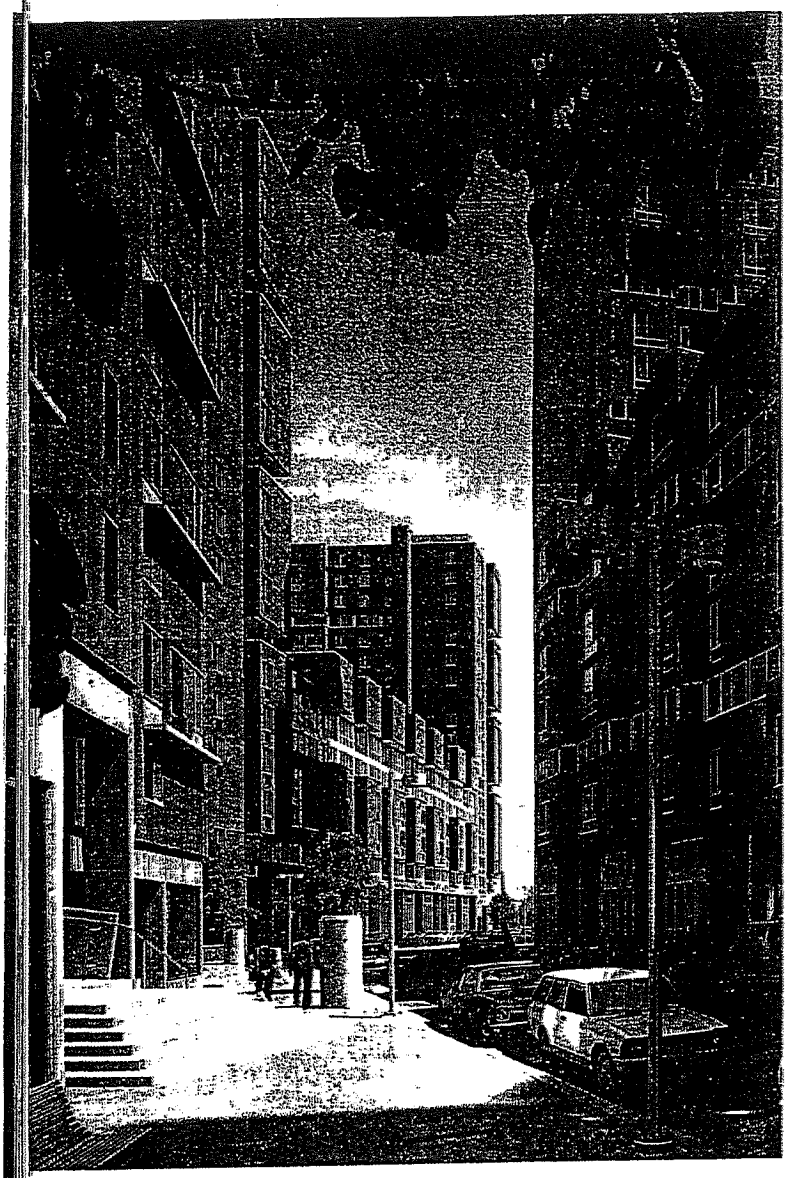
Though Paul Goldberger was not happy with the look of the cement-asbestos cladding of Island House and Rivercross, he understood, as the architects claimed, that the money saved by using the material enabled them to do much more in the design of the apartments and courtyards. Goldberger was particularly taken with a "well-planned" two-bedroom apartment in Island House, "with a bedroom that feels as if it were jutting out over the water, and has views up and down the river," making it "one of the most spectacular medium-sized apartments built in New York in years." He also praised the area surrounding the building: "The exterior open spaces are pleasing here, too, and one part of Island House—a landscaped and paved plaza with a restored church as its centerpiece—is as fine a civic square as any neighborhood in the city can claim."[58] Praising both buildings' generous communal spaces and amenities—which included a glassed-in swimming pool overlooking the East River at Rivercross, another notable benefit of the architects' efforts at cost cutting—the critic Stanley Abercrombie noted:

> This sort of housing design—seriously concerned with ennobling and lifting the spirits of those it houses, not just within their private apartments but throughout the buildings' whole progression of spaces—is the sort of housing most architects want to build. Most never have the opportunity. . . . The Roosevelt Island housing, therefore, (particularly "Rivercross") is cause for the architectural profession to rejoice: the UDC has provided a rare opportunity for experimentation, and Johansen & Bhavnani have taken full advantage of it. If in the short term context of the housing market (because the generous semi-public areas must be paid for by increased cost for the private areas), the scheme remains problematic, in the long-term context of evolving architectural forms that will satisfy man's need for civilized housing, the Johansen & Bhavnani designs constitute an important step.[59]

Sert, Jackson & Associates' contribution—the Eastwood Apartments (1976), housing 1,003 middle- and lower-middle-income families on a six-acre site along the east side of Main Street from numbers 510 to 580; and the 360-unit Westview Apartments (1976), 595–625 Main Street, on the west side facing Manhattan—had, as even Johansen and Bhavnani reportedly admitted, "more charm" than Rivercross and Island House.[60] In a series of housing and academic projects for Harvard and Boston universities, José Luis Sert had evolved a vocabulary of tile-decorated concrete buildings with skip-stop plans, glassed-in exterior passageways and sculptured penthouses that owed a good deal to the late work of Le Corbusier. At Roosevelt Island, Sert and his partner, Huson Jackson, added a new element: a composition of terraced finger buildings piling up in boxy increments from two stories at the water's edge to twenty-two stories



Eastwood Apartments, Roosevelt Island. Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976. View to the east of Main Street facade. Rosenthal. SJA

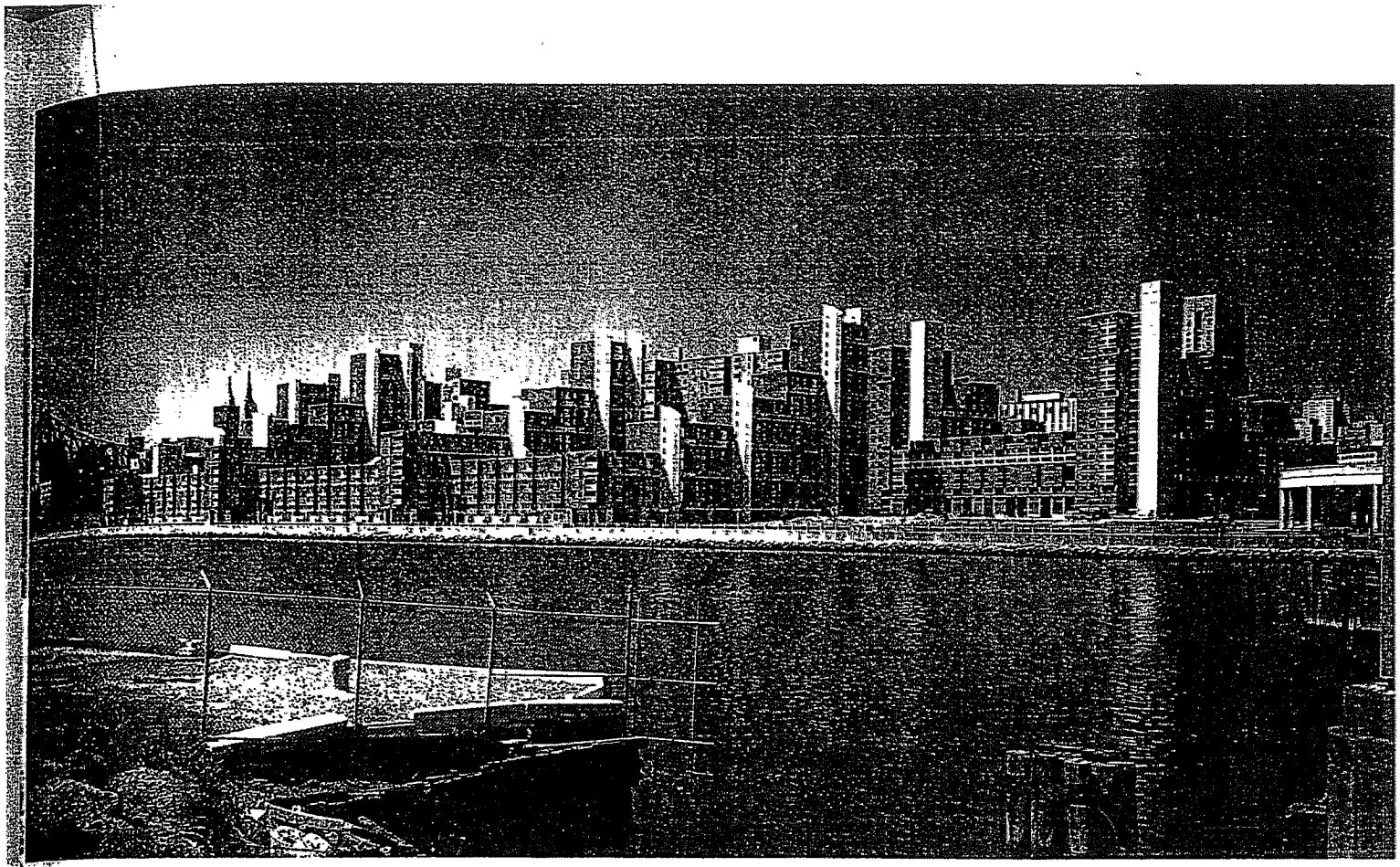


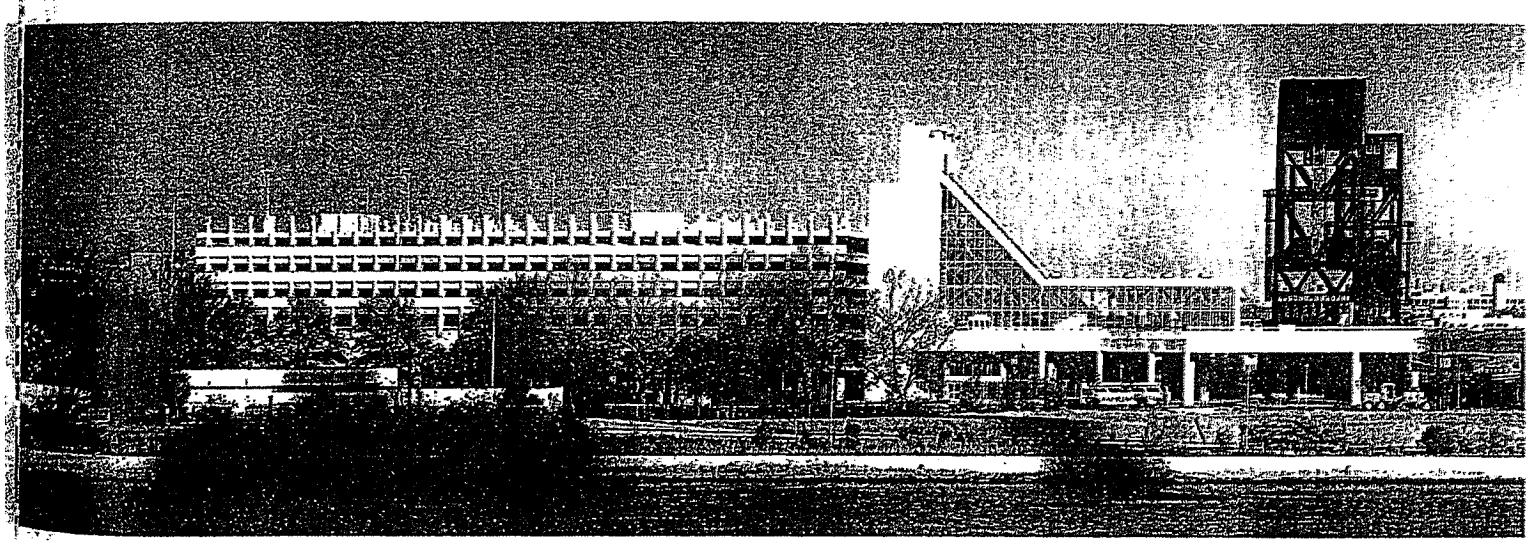
along Main Street. Sert and Jackson proposed that the roof terraces be used as children's play areas, but the UDC opposed the idea for reasons of both cost and security.

The buildings were grouped to form a series of courtyards, preserving some of the site's existing trees. Breaking with the Johnson and Burgee plan, which had called for courtyards open to the river, Sert and Jackson closed them with six-story buildings at the ends, although the structures were cut through with monumentally scaled open-air passageways that framed water views. Along Main Street they placed seven-story buildings between the four twenty-two-story slab ends, in an effort to realize some of the intimate scale Johnson and Burgee had proposed, which had been lost when Logue permitted much higher densities and much taller buildings. Still, the effect was somewhat canyonlike. Inside, the buildings' elevators stopped at every third floor, with corridors leading to individual apartments on that floor and internal staircases leading up or down to the other two floors. The apartments located above or below the corridor ran as "floor-throughs," with windows at both ends. Comparing the work of Johansen & Bhavnani and Sert, Jackson & Associates in 1976, Goldberger observed that though the Johansen buildings had the choicer views and catered to the wealthier tenants, the Sert buildings "have a certain edge."[61]

Kallmann & McKinnell's Motorgate (1974) constituted the island's only new freestanding public facility.[62] Residents and guests parked their cars in this structure; to reach their ultimate destination, they could take (for no charge) the specially designed, red-painted, battery-powered electric minibuses that tacked up and down Main Street. Drivers making deliveries could travel on Main Street, where short-term curbside parking was permitted. Goldberger described the 1,000-car reinforced-concrete garage, which incorporated shops, a fire station and a post office in a recessed sidewalk arcade, as "one of the finest buildings on the island—the same Brutalist concrete vocabulary that was overbearing in works by these architects such as the Boston City Hall is just right for a combination garage and symbolic entrance to a community."[63]

In 1976 Roosevelt Island finally became more accessible to Manhattan when the new tram was opened for service.[64] The idea began as a temporary solution to the island's access problem in March 1973, when William Chafee, one of the UDC's staff architects, proposed a gondola-type aerial cable car connecting the west side of Second Avenue between Fifty-ninth and Sixtieth streets to a site on the island north of the Queensboro Bridge at 300 Main Street. Designed by the engineering firm of Lev Zetlin Associates and built by the VSL Corporation/von Rolls Ltd. of Bern, Switzerland, the 3,100-foot-long tram, which was identical to the cableways in both Disney theme parks, took three and a half minutes and cost fifty cents per ride—the same cost as a subway ride. The tram carried two synchronized 125-passenger cars, one going in each direction, on cables hung 300 feet above the river at its highest point, where it crossed the openwork steel structure of Tower No. 2, just east of York Avenue. Tower No. 1 was located between Second and First avenues, and Tower No. 3 was just at Roosevelt Island's western shore. Twelve trips could be made per hour on what was billed as the world's first mass-transit tramway, moving 1,500 people each way. Although the system was managed and monitored from the Roosevelt Island terminal, each car had an attendant who could override the automatic controls. Passengers were lifted above the river, following a route just north of the Queensboro Bridge, where they could gaze through the wraparound windows of the twenty-five-by-thirteen-foot cabin at the spectacular urban scenery and at the traffic on the bridge.



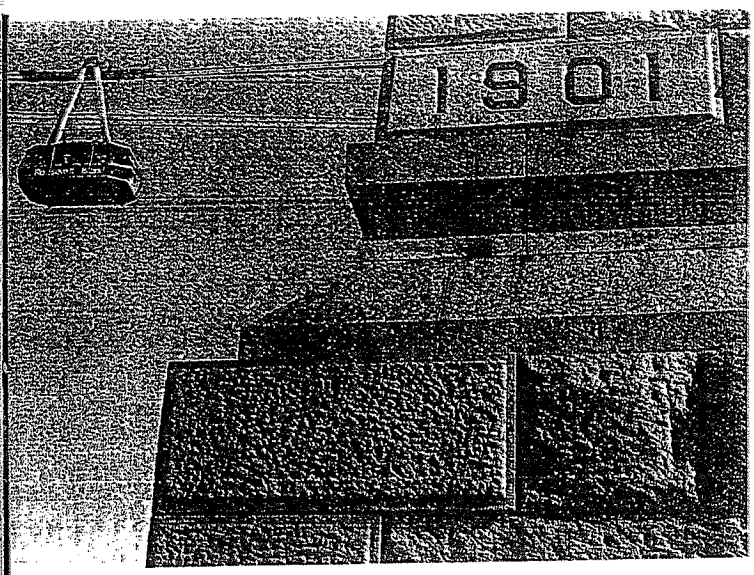


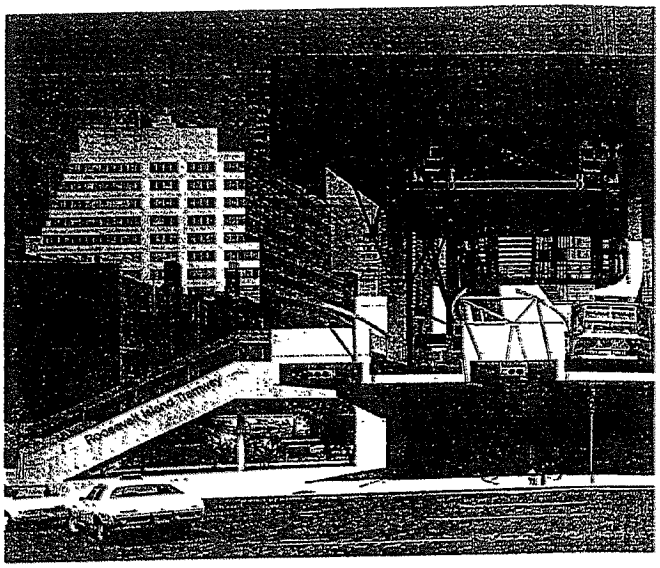
Top left: View to the north on Main Street, Roosevelt Island, showing, from left to right: Island House (Johansen & Bhavnani, 1975), Westview Apartments, (Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976) and Eastwood Apartments (Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976) Rosenthal SJA

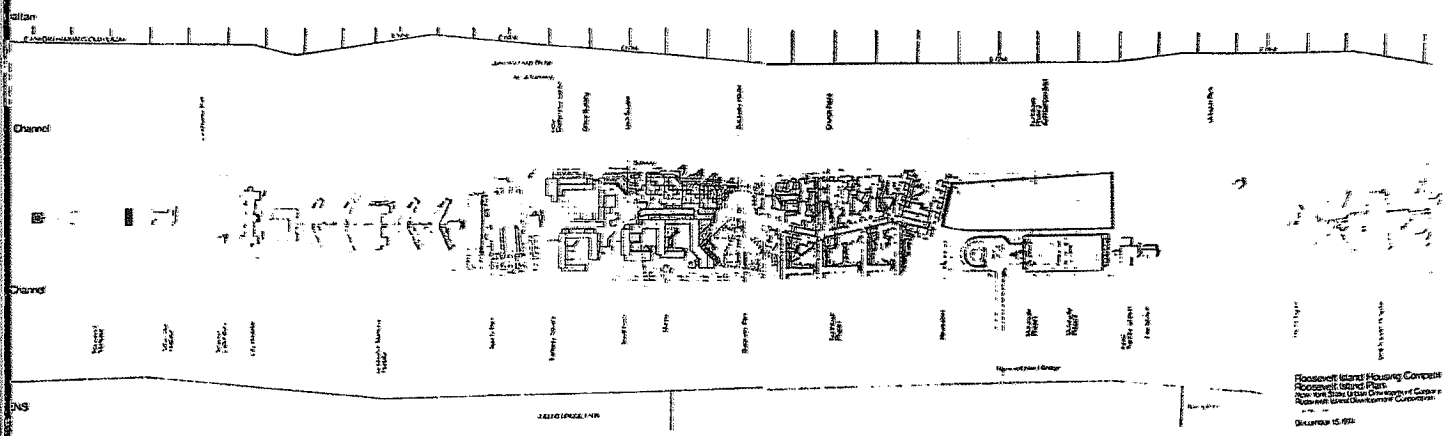
Bottom left: Mock-up of floor-through unit, Roosevelt Island. Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1971. Rosenthal. SJA

Top: Eastwood, Roosevelt Island. Sert, Jackson & Associates, 1976. View to the southwest from Queens. Rosenthal SJA

Bottom: Motorgate, Roosevelt Island. Kallmann & McKinnell, 1974. View to the east KMW







Top left: Roosevelt Island Tram, Roosevelt Island. Lev Zetlin Associates, 1976. View to the north from base of Queensboro Bridge (Henry Hornbostel and Gustave Lindenthal, 1901–9). TT

Top right: Manhattan Terminal, Roosevelt Island Tram, west side of Second Avenue, East Fifty-ninth to East Sixtieth Street. Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen in association with Lev Zetlin Associates, 1976. View to the west. PCO

Bottom: Map of Roosevelt Island for Northtown Competition, 1974 *Roosevelt Island Housing Competition* UDC

On the Manhattan side, a six-story terminal was designed by Prentice & Chan, Ohlhausen in collaboration with Lev Zetlin Associates. The structure incorporated forty-inch steel-and-concrete columns, which were intended to support a thirty-two-story building, although the surmounting tower was never realized. The structure was also cantilevered along its eastern facade to accommodate the widening of Second Avenue and along its western facade to allow for an off-the-street bus stop, but neither plan was realized. Perhaps in part as a result of these elements, the tram station was a study in exaggerated contrasts. With rough, boldly massed concrete walls sheltering the brightly colored rotary machinery and tendril-like cables, it was, as Goldberger wrote, "a really lovely kindergarten version of *Modern Times* and absolutely the right beginning or end for a visit to the island, which is itself so much a combination of modern, industrial imagery and gentle game-playing."[65]

At its first test run on February 16, 1976, the tram ran into trouble near its Manhattan terminus, hitting the top of a streetlight pole that was to have been lowered. After a series of false starts and rescinded dates, its dedication was held on May 17. Despite the snags, not to mention the gloom that increasingly surrounded the Roosevelt Island project as the UDC, and then the city, fell victim to financial crisis, the tram was a bright, optimistic vision. As Michael Winkleman wrote in September 1975, prior to the tram's opening, "the three-minute ride is more than just another tourist attraction. Though it's sure to rival the old favorites—the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the Cyclone—the big news is that, as New York teeters on bankruptcy, a futuristic means of travel and a newfangled town, floating midstream, are becoming realities."[66]

The editors of *Time* said that, with the tram's opening, "convenience and mystique came together" in "the Little Apple," as they called Roosevelt Island. "Paris has its glittering Ile de la Cité on the Seine," they contended, "Budapest its merry Margaret Island on the Danube. New York City also has an island in the stream that may someday be an equally stimulating place to live or visit."[67] Michael Demarest, a senior writer for *Time*, described the tram ride:

> Cabin Two began its stately ascent noiselessly and almost imperceptibly. The 18,300-lb. C-2 reached a top speed of 16.3 m.p.h. and a peak altitude of 250 feet. . . . We touched down on R.I. after a flight of 3,134 ft. and 3½ min. . . . Wind speeds are constantly checked; service is stopped if gusts reach 45 m.p.h. On C-2's return trip, winds caused the tram to tilt 1° to starboard, according to the onboard inclinometer. "Not feeling seasick?" asked engineer Ozerkis. "Or airsick?" If we had said yes, he would doubtless have passed out Dramamine.[68]

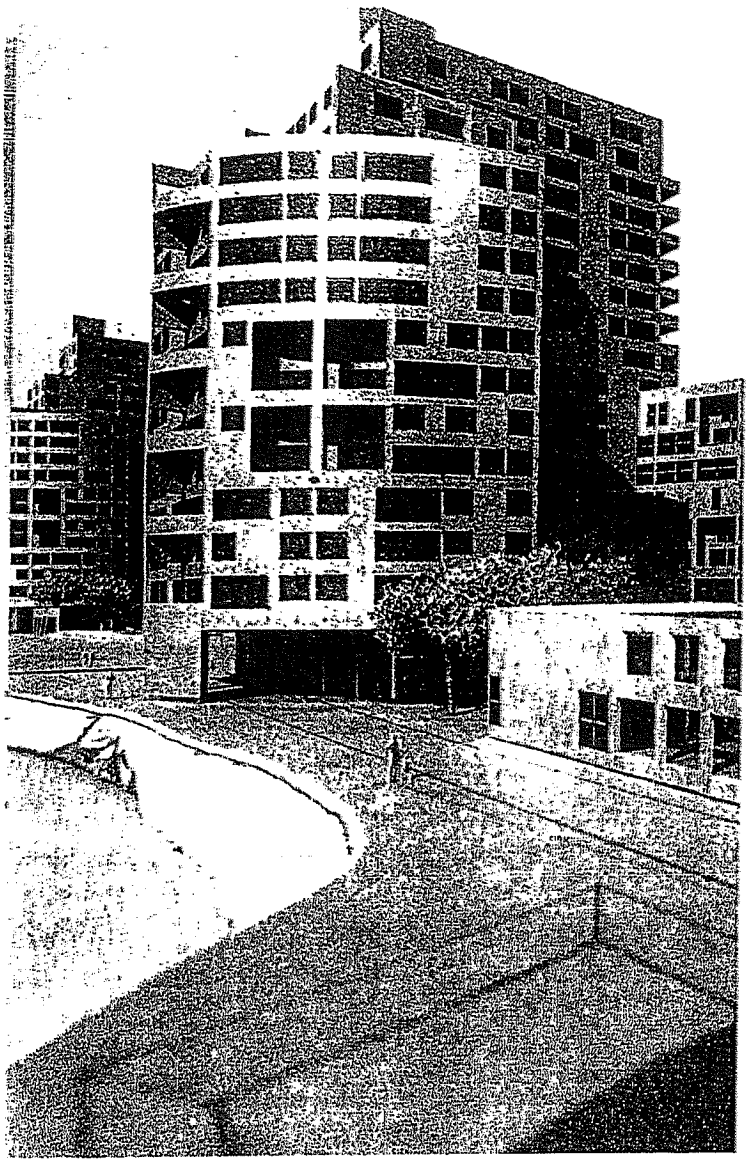
Writing in 1979, Goldberger was also enthralled with the tram ride, calling it "extraordinary—gentle, soft, soaring," and saying "there could be no better way to traverse a river or a part of a city." He continued: "It is a symptom of our times, no doubt, that you think first that you are in Disneyland and that someone has deviously pasted a photograph of the Manhattan skyline across the window of your tram car, but if the illusion lasts no more than a split second, there is greater pleasure still in perceiving the reality: this is not Disneyland at all—it is New York."[69]

A significant component of the Roosevelt Island plan was the sequence of open spaces, ranging from Main Street to various parks and gardens as well as a waterfront esplanade, and the preservation of some of the island's historic structures. In Northtown, Blackwell House (1796–1804), a clapboard farmhouse, was restored by Giorgio Cavaglieri, a process in which, according to Goldberger, "a modest, unpretentious farmhouse" had been "sanitized" to look "like a model house for a new suburban tract development." Although Goldberger praised Dan Kiley's work in creating Blackwell Park, the landscape setting for the house, he felt that it was ultimately a failure because of the impossibility "of bridging the visual gap between this poor, lonely little building and the huge housing blocks looming near it."[70] Goldberger much preferred the fate of Frederick Clarke Withers's Gothic-style Chapel of the Good Shepherd (1888–89), which Cavaglieri restored and recycled as the Good Shepherd Community Ecumenical Center; it was surrounded by a plaza designed by Johansen & Bhavnani and Lawrence Halprin & Associates.[71]

In 1974, with the work of the first phase nearing completion, the UDC announced a two-stage design competition for the completion of Northtown, with 1,000 units of housing on the 9.2-acre site opposite the Motorgate.[72] In his statement to the competitors, Logue attempted to justify the competition brief, which would inevitably bring forward high-density, high-rise solutions:

> It was only a year and one half ago that we announced our intention to build low-rise high-density housing as opposed to high-rise housing throughout New York State. . . . Why then, on Roosevelt Island, are we asking the profession to address a housing problem at twice the density of our stated low-rise housing policy? There are several reasons and in them lie the heart of this request. The first is the context. Roosevelt Island is a new community without an existing residential stock in a fixed configuration. It has excellent views and a dimension of water around it that affords the opportunity to create housing based on human scale without the cornice lines of neighboring buildings of another century as a constraint. The second is our genuine desire to go beyond conventional housing solutions to find ways in which families can be well housed in a diversity of situations. If we can be convinced that elevator dependent housing can serve families, as well as elderly and childless households, with maximum livability, it will give us much more flexibility in our housing program.[73]

The competition jury, chaired by José Luis Sert, included the architects Paul Rudolph, Joseph Wasserman and Alexander Cooper, as well as Sharon Lee Ryder, an architectural journalist, Franklin D. Becker, a sociologist, and Frederick P. Rose, a real estate developer. As originally proposed, the competition was to be held in two stages: eight finalists would be selected at the end of the first stage, and first-, second- and third-prize winners at the end of the second stage. But in February 1975 it appeared unlikely that the UDC would be able to pay the interest due on its previously issued bonds, and Governor Hugh Carey consequently asked for Logue's resignation, replacing him with Richard Ravitch. Because it was clear that the new units would not soon be built, the competitors were officially notified of the UDC's problems and the competition was called off in midstream.[74] With so much work already done by the entrants, however, the UDC resumed the competition as a single-stage undertaking that would probably not lead to a building commission. For some entrants this was a remarkable opportunity to focus on "ideas" as opposed to buildings. Joseph Wasserman would later explain: "This competition was a device to publicize among the professionals of this country the issues, objectives and methodology of UDC and to get literally thousands of architects thinking about these things on this kind of scale."[75]



Above: Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Stern & Hagmann, 1974. Model. View to the northeast. Stoecklein. RAMSA

Top right: Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Sam Davis and ELS Design Group, 1974. Model. View to the southeast. Severin. SD

Bottom right: Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Kyu Sung Woo, 1974. Axonometric. View to the southeast. KSW

Bottom far right: Competition entry, Northtown Competition. Kyu Sung Woo. Model. View to the east. KSW

Two hundred and fifty architects prepared schemes, and a divided jury split the prize between four young firms: Stern & Hagmann, of New York; Kyu Sung Woo, also of New York; Sam Davis and the ELS Design Group, of Berkeley, California; and Robert L. Amico and Robert Brandon of Champaign, Illinois. Sert dominated the jury, as Paul Goldberger noted in his report of the decision, so that many of the entries, including three of the four winners, were similar to the Sert-designed housing under construction on Roosevelt Island at the time. Goldberger described the fourth scheme:

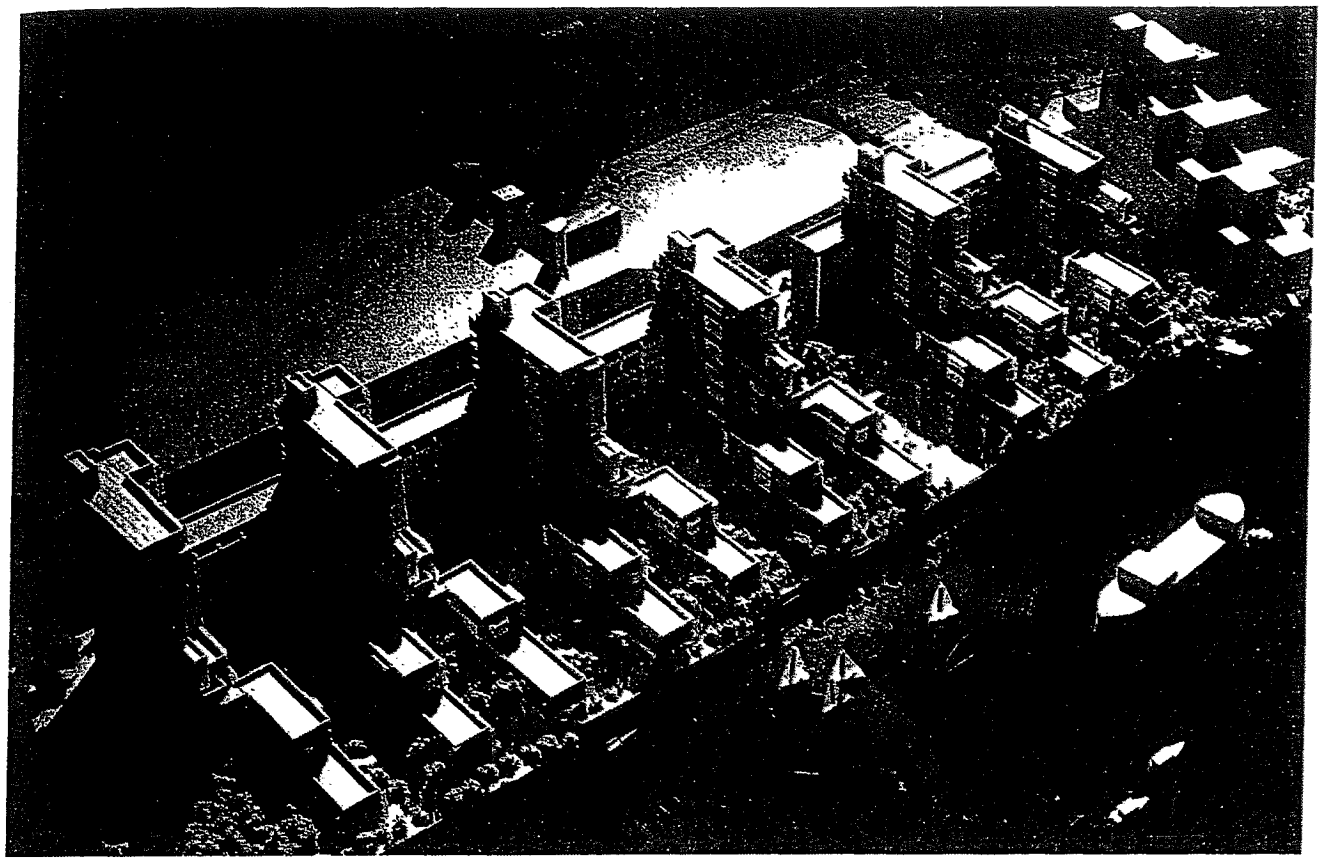
> The one entry to depart from the Sert massing, and the most controversial one so far as the jury was concerned, was the one from Stern and Hagmann. It consisted of higher sections on the riverfront rather than inland, with curving facades facing downriver to take advantage of the views. The complex was planned around an irregular central open space, and its facade design recalls buildings by Robert Venturi, the controversial architect whose work has been a major influence on Robert Stern.[76]

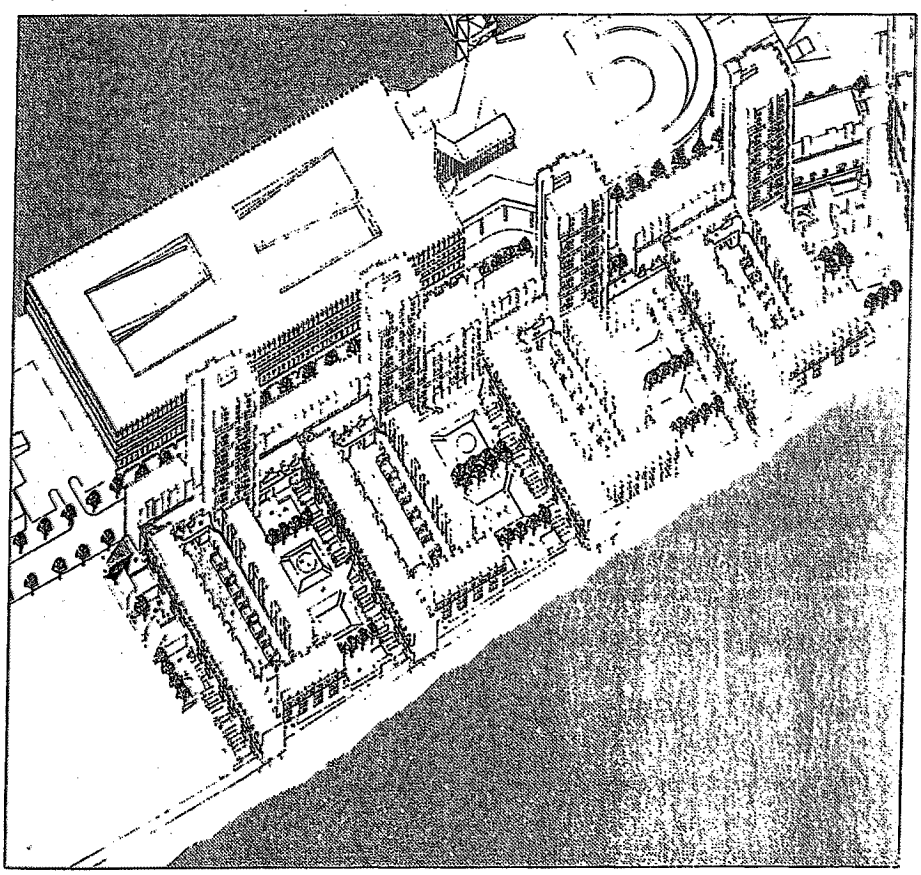
In explaining his firm's competition entry, Stern said: "Our decision to enter the Roosevelt Island competition was based on our belief that the recent, revisionist housing theory of Jane Jacobs, Oscar Newman and others remains unfulfilled in formal terms, and that urban multifamily housing design, at least in this country, remains largely alienated from its American antecedents, mired in pseudo-technological pipe dreams."[77]

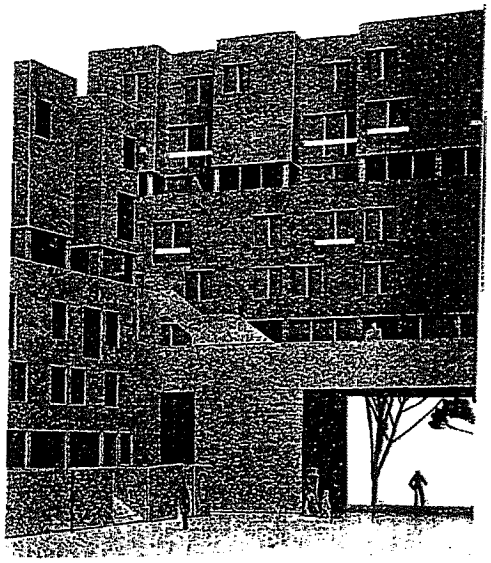
While the jurors remained mostly silent about the controversy, Paul Rudolph said of the Stern & Hagmann proposal: "I don't understand this scheme—it is so much in competition with what has already been built. The central space doesn't provide any sense of 'space' as I understand it. There is an arbitrary and picturesque turning of the interior mall."[78] Other members of the jury were far more sympathetic: Joseph Wasserman said, "It has a New York quality, a richness. I could spend a day here discovering a lot of interesting places. A lot of concern was given to the livability issues. It is a rich tapestry of ideas."[79]

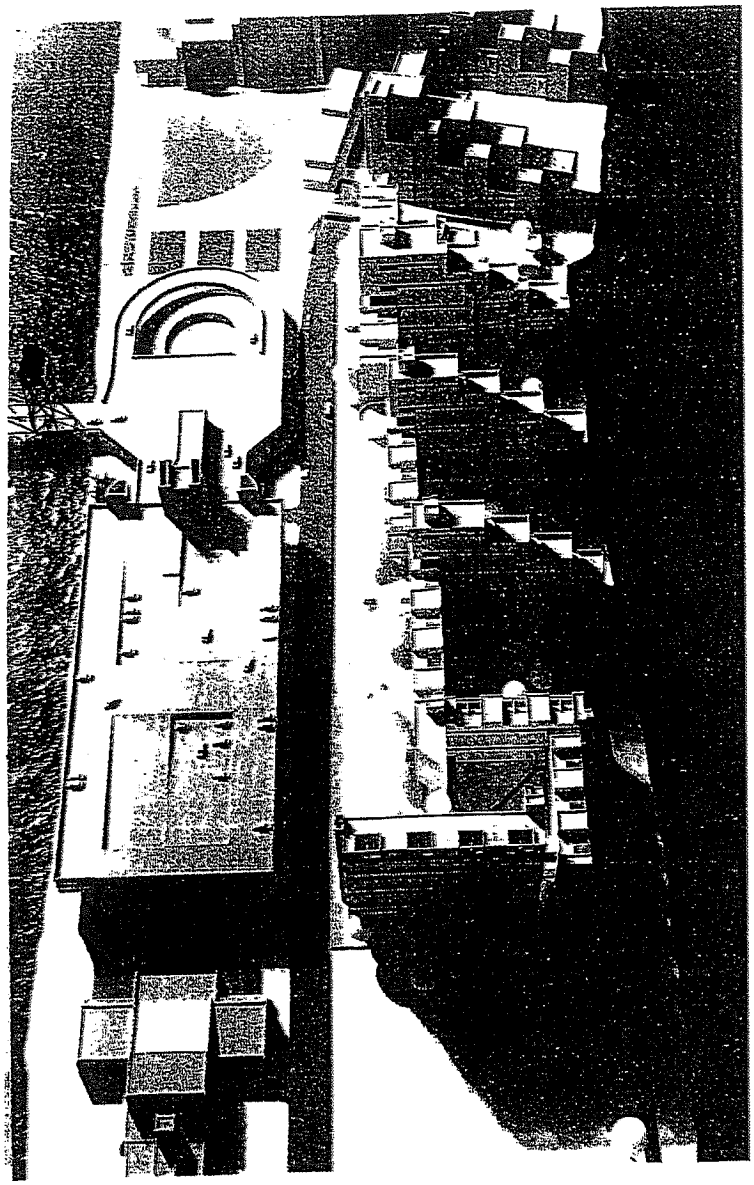
A number of other provocative schemes were not premiated: Clinton Sheerr and Susana Torre's proposal for neutral slablike buildings in which individual tenants could, under professional guidance, tailor their own units;[80] Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis's re-creation of Manhattan;[81] and O. M. Ungers's even more extreme idea, a typological simulation complete with Central Park surrounded by a grid of streets and buildings.[82] Each of these schemes would become important benchmarks in the artistic rediscovery of Manhattan as an icon that would become prevalent in the late 1980s. The group Art Net, consisting of Peter Cook, Ron Herron, Ingrid Morris and six other English collaborators, as well as the American Peter Eisenman, presented an entry that called for three spiraling cylinders, looking a bit as if Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum had been merged with a gas-storage tank.[83]

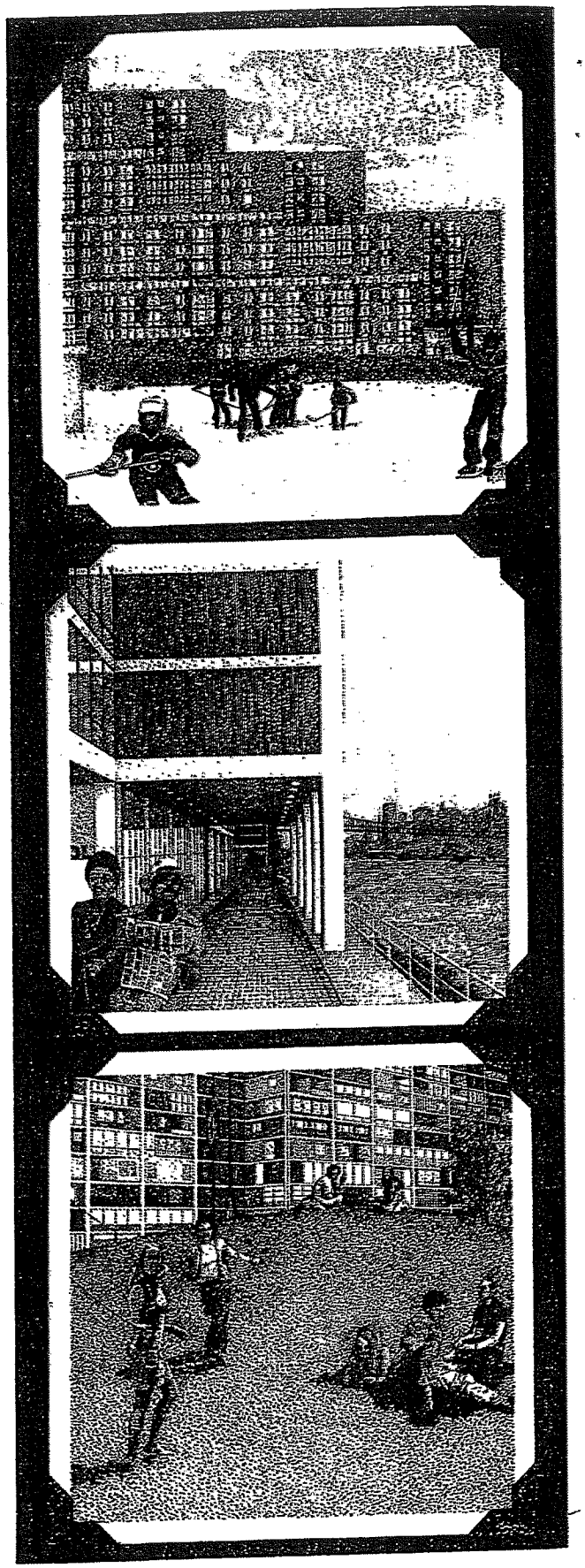
Although the competition yielded no building commissions, the completed portions of Roosevelt Island nonetheless constituted a considerable achievement. By 1978, 5,500 people occupied the island's four apartment buildings. If the development's architecture failed to satisfy all critics, its plan did succeed in retaining the island's inherent advantages as a kind of *rus in urbe*, albeit a relatively high-density one. Robin Herman, writing in the *New York Times* in 1978, described the island in a Manhattanite's equivalent to bucolic terms: "Just three and a half minutes from Bloomingdale's by way of the Tinker Toy colored tram, it is yet a world apart from the





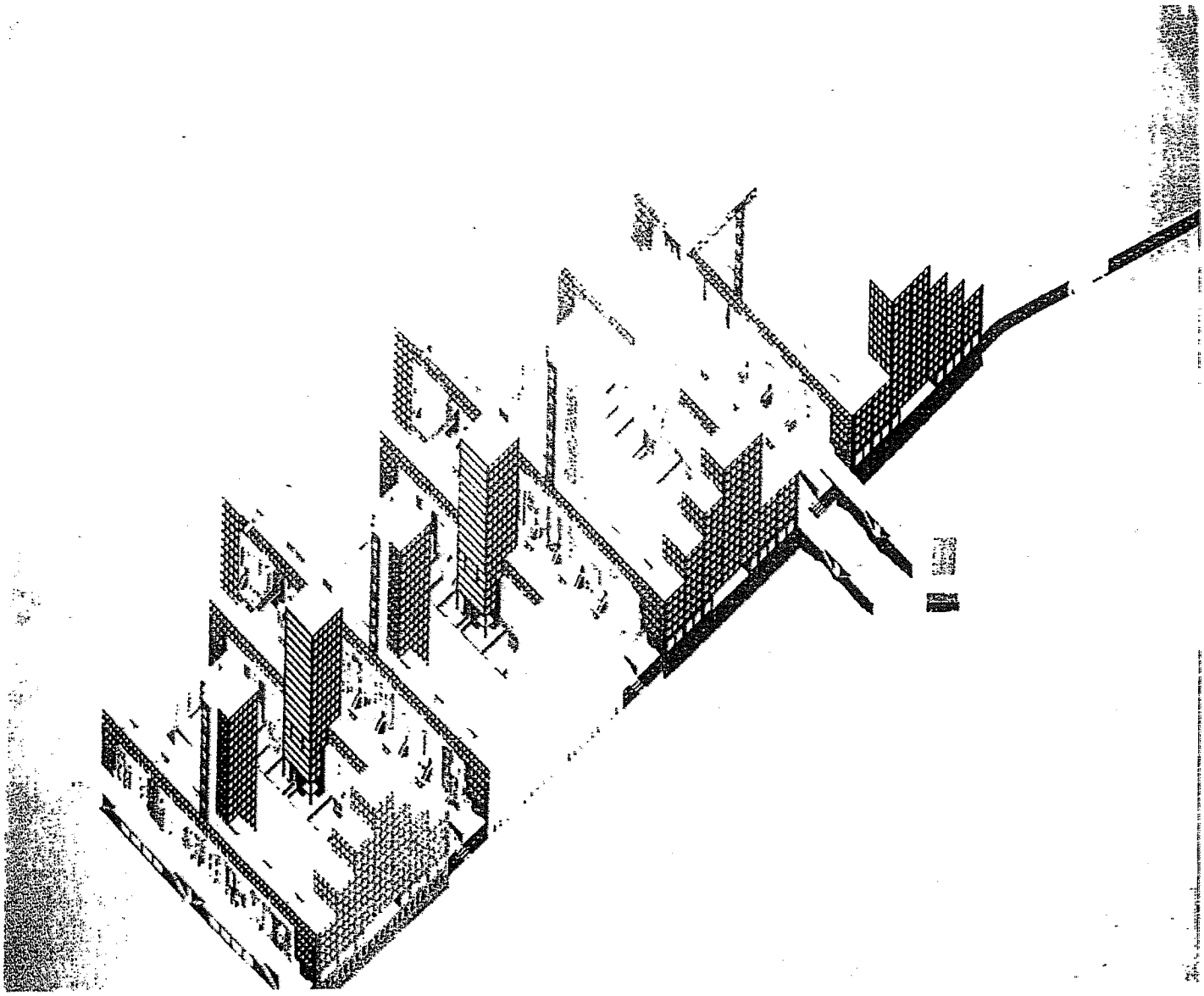






Above: Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Robert L. Amico and Robert Brandon, 1974. Model. View to the south. Kaha. RLA

Right: Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Clinton Sheerr and Susana Torre, 1974. Three renderings of site in use ST



Competition entry, Northtown Competition, Roosevelt Island. Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis, 1974. Axonometric. View to the southeast. OMA

heat and bustle of Dry Dock country." In this "oasis of quiet carpeted in suburban green," Herman said, residents could enjoy "the constant breeze that keeps Roosevelt Island fresh smelling and always a few degrees cooler than the 'mainland.'"[84] Ironically, however, it was in part the island's ability to distinguish itself from the surrounding "mainland" that limited its success; while Roosevelt Island did indeed avoid some of the urbanistic chaos of Manhattan, it also lacked its vitality. As Barbara Goldstein put it in *Architectural Design* in 1975, "Although linked directly to Manhattan, Roosevelt Island has all the appearances of a new town, or a chunk of residential White Plains floated down the East River. It seems to be more of a hermetically sealed suburb than an integral part of New York City."[85] And not all of the island's residents were charmed either. Ron Aaron Eisenberg, a public relations executive, said that while the new town was "a place that people should see and that sociologists and urbanologists and a multitude of other 'ologists' should study," it was "depersonalization itself."[86] After living on Roosevelt Island for three months, he returned to Manhattan.