

POLICY AND DESIGN FOR HOUSING

Lessons of the Urban Development Corporation 1968-1975

Journal Article New York gets plans for a brand-new city of 70,000 including 50-story towers, on island in East River
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New York gets plans for a brand-new city of 70,000, including 50-story towers, on island in East River

During the past 20 years New York builders and realtors have often looked at shabby Welfare Island in the East River (see map) and have casually commented on how ideal it would be for redevelopment. But they have been discouraged by the island's transportation drawbacks, its lack of any community facilities, such as schools and stores, and the difficulty of inducing the city to sell it for private development. Once known as Blackwell Island, the relatively isolated, elongated 167-acre tract was the site of a city penitentiary until the midthirties. Since the jail was closed, it has been used only for city hospitals, nurses' homes, and other public welfare institutions, and many of its decrepit old buildings have been left to rot and its open areas surrendered to debris and weeds.

Last month, however, city officials were informally considering the first comprehensive plan for turning the entire island into a brand-new city within a city—a new modern urban community of 70,000 population, complete with schools, stores, churches, its own new subway station (in one of the two under-river transit lines that go through the island), and improved connections with the Queensborough Bridge to Manhattan, which passes over it.

Sponsors of the bold proposal, a project that would cost a half billion dollars or more, were: Frederick W. Richmond, industrialist and financier, who fathered the idea; Planner and Architect Victor Gruen, who developed the architectural and planning concepts; and New York Realtor and Developer Roger L. Stevens. Associated with them as advisors are: Samuel I. Rosenman, attorney specializing in urban redevelopment law and former special assistant to President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Colonel S. H. Bingham (retired), engineer and transportation consultant, and Dr. Ralph E. Snyder, president of New York Medical College, consultant on medical and geriatric problems. As part of the plan, the city would continue to operate the Bird S.

Coler Memorial Hospital on the island, mainly housing geriatric patients, and in an adjacent area the developers would build one large apartment building designed especially for elderly people who would not require hospitalization but who could utilize many of the services available at the geriatrics center.

To be renamed East Island, the new community would consist primarily of eight 50-story apartment towers and a series of serpentine apartment structures varying from eight to 30 stories high running almost the entire 10,500-foot length of the island (model photos, right). Apartments would total about 20,000, primarily two- and three-bedroom units for middle-income families with children. Average apartment size would be 1,177 square feet; average FHA room count: 6:45.

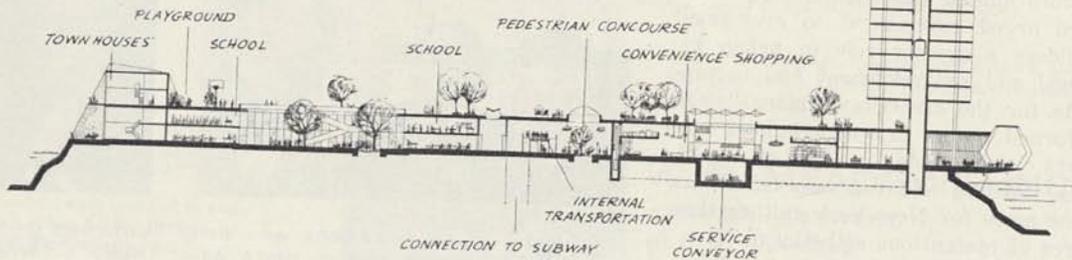
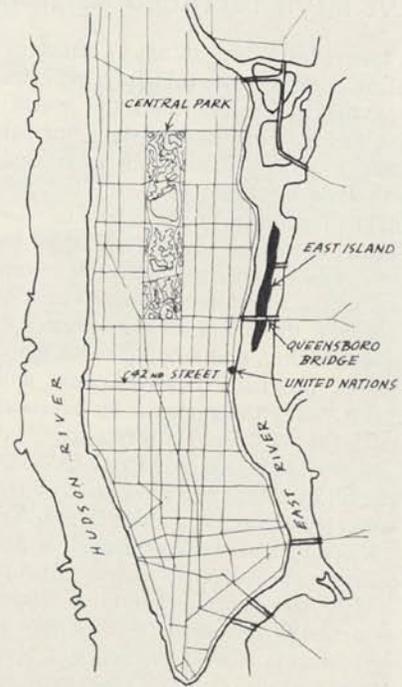
While population density on the island would exceed 400 per acre, this would be offset by two of its most unusual features: The site is surrounded by open water, and no private autos would be allowed on the island. Instead there would be a large parking facility on the nearby Queens mainland. But a bridge from Queens and a service road system would still allow vehicular access to the island hospital and circulation by police and fire vehicles.

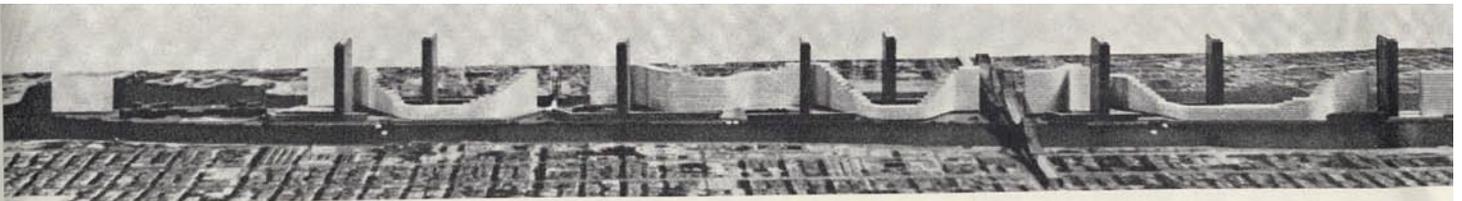
Structurally, the apartment buildings would all be erected on top of an immense concrete platform about 22 feet above ground level. The area beneath this platform would house all mechanical equipment, storage space, commercial facilities and the two-story basementless schools which would have rooftop playgrounds on the raised platform level. Under the platform there also would be an internal passenger transportation system for the island, such as a continuous moving belt, and a service roadway (see section below).

Between 1828 and 1844, New York City acquired the island for a total of \$52,500. If it sold or leased development rights for 20,000 apartment units at a minimum of \$3,000 per unit, its current value would be at least \$60 million.

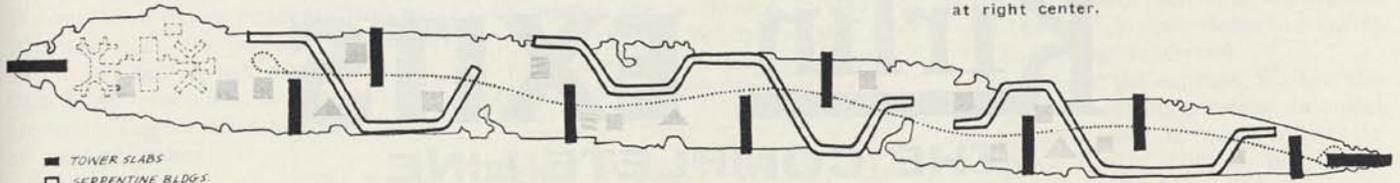


UNUSED ACREAGE on Welfare Island (above) is literally in the shadow of Manhattan's valuable and intensively developed midtown East Side (background), less than 1,000 feet away across the East River channel (see map below).



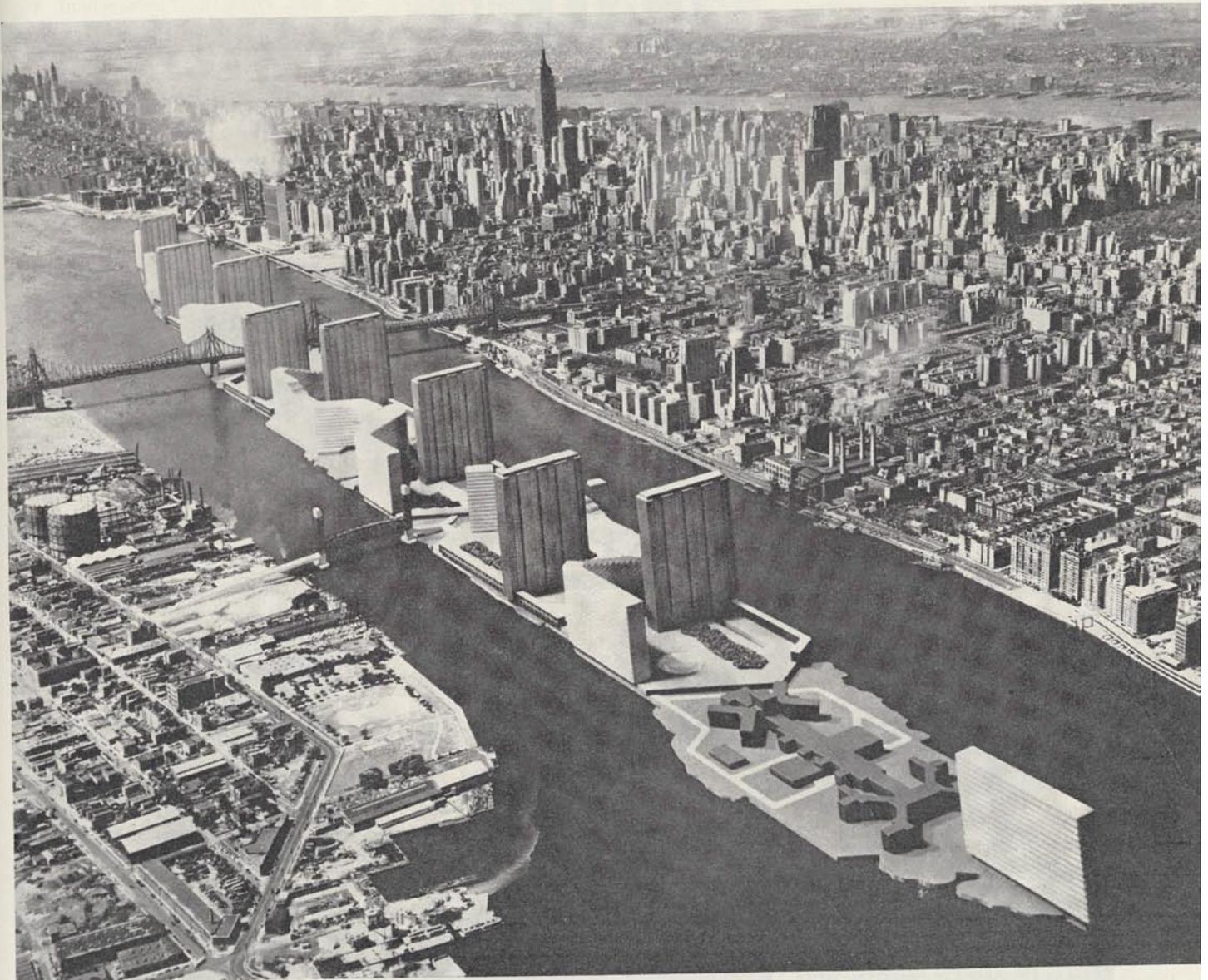


LOW-LEVEL VIEW of model shows how East River apartment city would appear from Manhattan. The island runs from 48th to 86th Streets; high-level Queensborough Bridge is at right center.



- TOWER SLABS
- SERPENTINE BLDGS.
- INTERNAL TRANSPORTATION
- ▲ SCHOOLS
- ▲ STORES

GROUND-LEVEL PLAN of proposed development outlines locations of tower and serpentine apartment buildings; it also indicates location of community buildings and routes for service road and internal passenger transportation system.



NEWS continued on page 11