

# POLICY AND DESIGN FOR HOUSING

Lessons of the Urban Development Corporation 1968-1975

**Journal Article** New Town for New York City  
by John S. Margolie  
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# NEW TOWN FOR NEW YORK CITY

BY JOHN S. MARGOLIES

It is a planners' dream—a long sliver of an island located in the narrow channel of the East River in New York City. It has magnificent views of the Manhattan skyline, immediately to the west and not-quite-so-magnificent views of Queens immediately to the east. Welfare Island, with its long history as a repository for unpleasant functions—scandalous prisons and mental hospitals, has been pretty nearly deserted since 1950.

Welfare Island is about 2 miles in length and about 800 ft. wide at its widest. At its northern and southern tips remain two functional and efficient hospital units which care for long-term and chronically-ill patients, taking up about 37 of the island's 147 acres. The remainder is dotted with decaying buildings worthy of preservation as landmarks, decaying buildings unworthy of preservation, and a training school for firemen.

New York's ravished *Ile de la Cité* could become a great resource to the city and to the region and numerous proposals of varying appeal and practicality have been brought forth in the last 20 years. Propositions have called for a high-density housing development, a park, an amusement park, industrial use, prison use, expanded hospital use, and combinations thereof.

Past development proposals have been impeded by limited access to the island. A vehicular bridge from the Queens side was completed in 1956. The 59th Street Bridge from Manhattan to Queens crosses the southern portion of the island, with elevator service from the bridge to the island providing pedestrian access. But a new subway tunnel, now in the works, will place a station on the island, making it immediately accessible within minutes of midtown Manhattan.

In January 1968, New York's Mayor John V. Lindsay decided to confront the problem of the island and its development with his appointment of the Welfare Island Planning and Development Committee. This committee submitted a 141-page report to the Mayor in February 1969—a thoroughly-researched document which suggested the retention of the two hospitals, relocation of the training school, creation of a mixed-income residential community of 20,000 and supporting public facilities, and provision of major park areas.

In March the New York State Urban Development Corporation commissioned a team headed by Architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee to prepare a master plan for the island. The Johnson-Burgee plan, unveiled this month at an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, compacts the residential and public facilities in a two-part town center located adjacent to the new subway stop, so that meaningful open spaces could be created. The plan is purposefully schematic and architecturally nonspecific—the planners' main concern being to establish a framework to preserve the romantic insular quality of the site.

## Main Street and new town

The only street in the new town, Main Street, runs south from a new parking garage located adjacent to the exit of the bridge from Queens. It will be served by a so-called minitransit system. Pedestrian and vehicular traffic will share the same road; private cars will not be permitted on the island.

"This is not a multilevel town," says Philip Johnson. "I'm too Jane Jacobs for two levels. In every two-level town that I have been in, one level is good and one isn't. In Montreal, all the action is down below; nobody walks in that square. You might just as well put a roof over it. In Hartford, nobody goes up to that second level."

Main Street is the physical spine of the town, and it bends through the residential section, purposely angled to present a sequence of experiences, and views. Pedestrian walkways run from river to river and offer extended vistas.

The island town is composed of two parts separated by a park. To the south of the park is the town center: a dramatic glass-roofed arcade connecting two major public spaces, the harbor facing Queens and the town square looking towards Manhattan. The arcade and town center will contain schools, hotel, office space, and some housing and other amenities (see page 44).

To the north of the park will be most of the 5000 residential units terraced down from Main Street to the water. The housing will change in height from up to 12-story apartment buildings along Main Street (where there will also be neighborhood shops

and facilities) to double-maisonette townhouses near the water's edge. The group of buildings will be "horseshoe"-shaped around courts opening to views of the river.

Thirty per cent of the housing units are to be low-income—with one third of these designed for the elderly; 25 per cent will be moderate-income; 20 per cent will be middle income; and the remaining 25 per cent will be conventionally financed.

## Parks and open spaces

The planners were concerned with the shaping and control of exterior space.

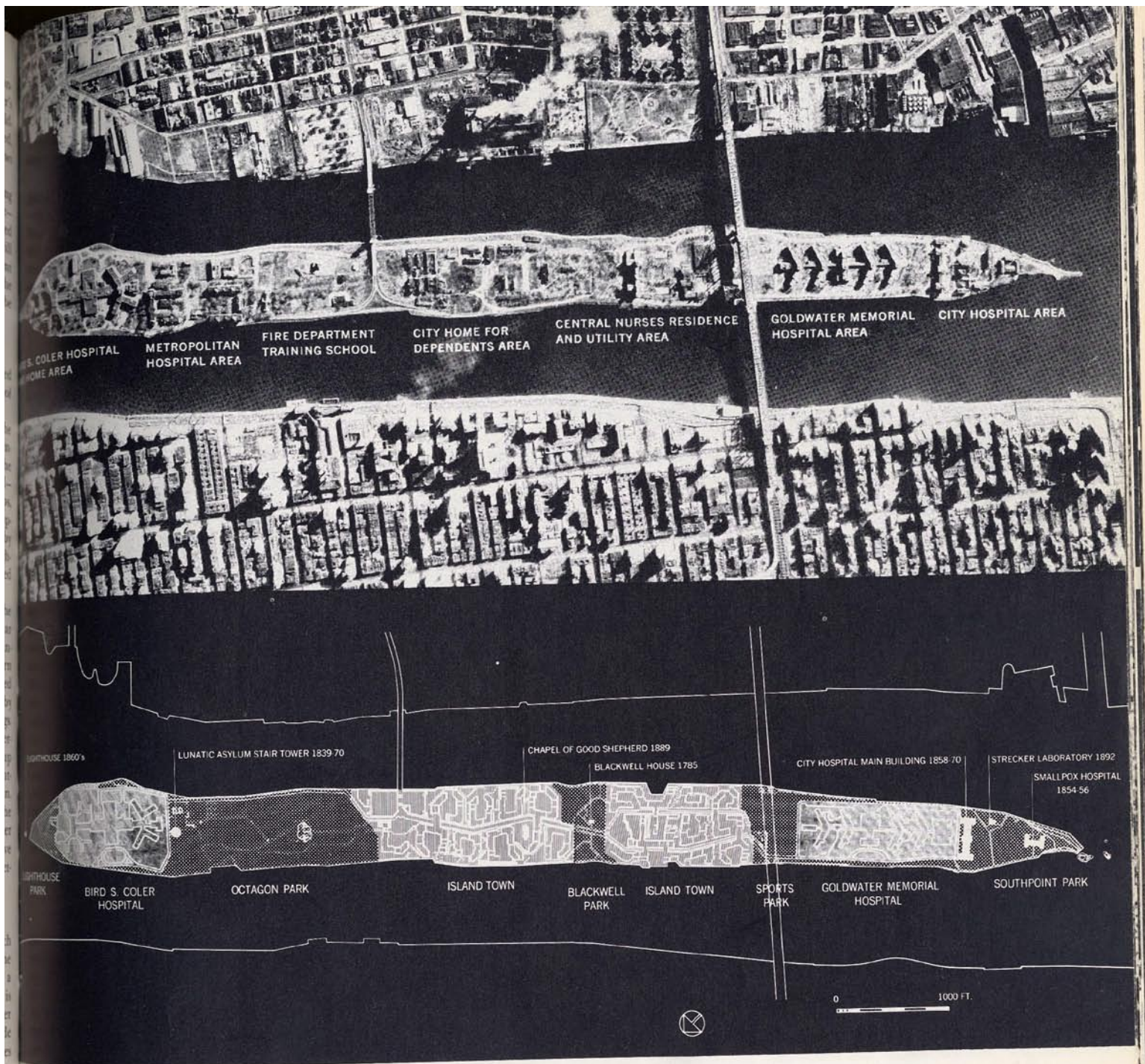
In the ecological park to the north of the town, various environmental conditions of the city and region are re-created—hills and depressions, swamps, grass, flowers and rock outcroppings, all interconnected by paths. And interspersed throughout the island will be restored buildings, relics of other eras.

The parks on both tips of the island will afford spectacular views of the river and the Manhattan skyline. On the southern tip is a 12-acre park, screened from the hospital complex by one of the preserved buildings. On the northern tip is a terraced recreation area facing up river past a 19th-century lighthouse, preserved in the plan. The six-acre sports park to the south of the new town under the 59th Street Bridge will have a baseball diamond and basketball courts.

## A grand promenade

Another major factor which shaped the plan was keeping the water's edge public; and thus a grand pedestrian promenade is planned to skirt the perimeter of the island. The promenade provides a variety of experiences as it dips down frequently to the water. It contrasts places having more activity with places of less activity, and varies the spaces along the path from wide to narrow. "This whole thing was designed not from a formal point of view," say the architects, "but from the promenaders' point of view. This is going to be the most extraordinary promenade in the world—4 miles of waterfront is quite a varied effect."

Mr. Margolies, a free-lance writer, is the author of "Multimedia Zoo," in the June issue of Forum.

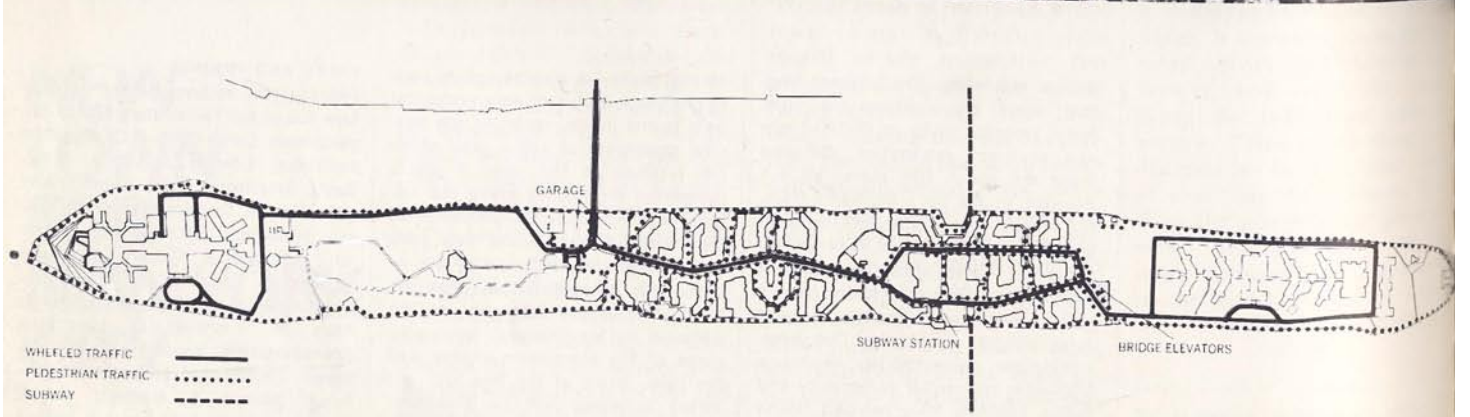


Before and after: The present Welfare Island, top, contains two functional hospital units at its northern and southern extremities. Between them are about 100 acres, all but deserted except for a fireman's training school, some connected facilities, and crumbling ruins of deserted institutions. Above is the development plan for the island prepared by a team headed by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, architects. The Johnson-Burgee plan centrally locates a 5000-unit residential community and public facilities in a two-part island town enclosing a town park. The island town is flanked on either side

by city parks—a six-acre sports park to the south and a 25-acre ecological park to the north—isolating the hospital complexes at either end, which are retained in the plan. A grand pedestrian promenade along the water's edge will skirt the perimeter of the island, encompassing new park developments at both tips of the island. The Johnson-Burgee plan exploits the unique insularity of the site and its breathtaking, panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline and the river. Some of the fine, old, deserted buildings will be preserved and restored as tangible symbols of the island's past.

#### FACTS AND FIGURES

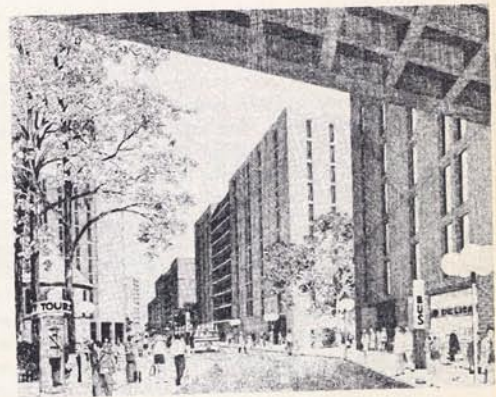
Proposal for redevelopment of Welfare Island for The Welfare Island Development Corp. (Benno C. Schmidt, chairman; Edward J. Logue, president). Architects: Philip Johnson and John Burgee. Consultants: Henry-Russell Hitchcock (architectural historian); Ammann & Whitney (structural engineers); Burns & McDonnell Co. (mechanical and utilities engineers); Allan M. Voorhees & Associates (transportation engineers); Zion & Breen (landscape architects); Seymour Jarmul & Bernard Brizee (housing advisors); Clarence F. Wicker (waterfront and bulkhead engineer).

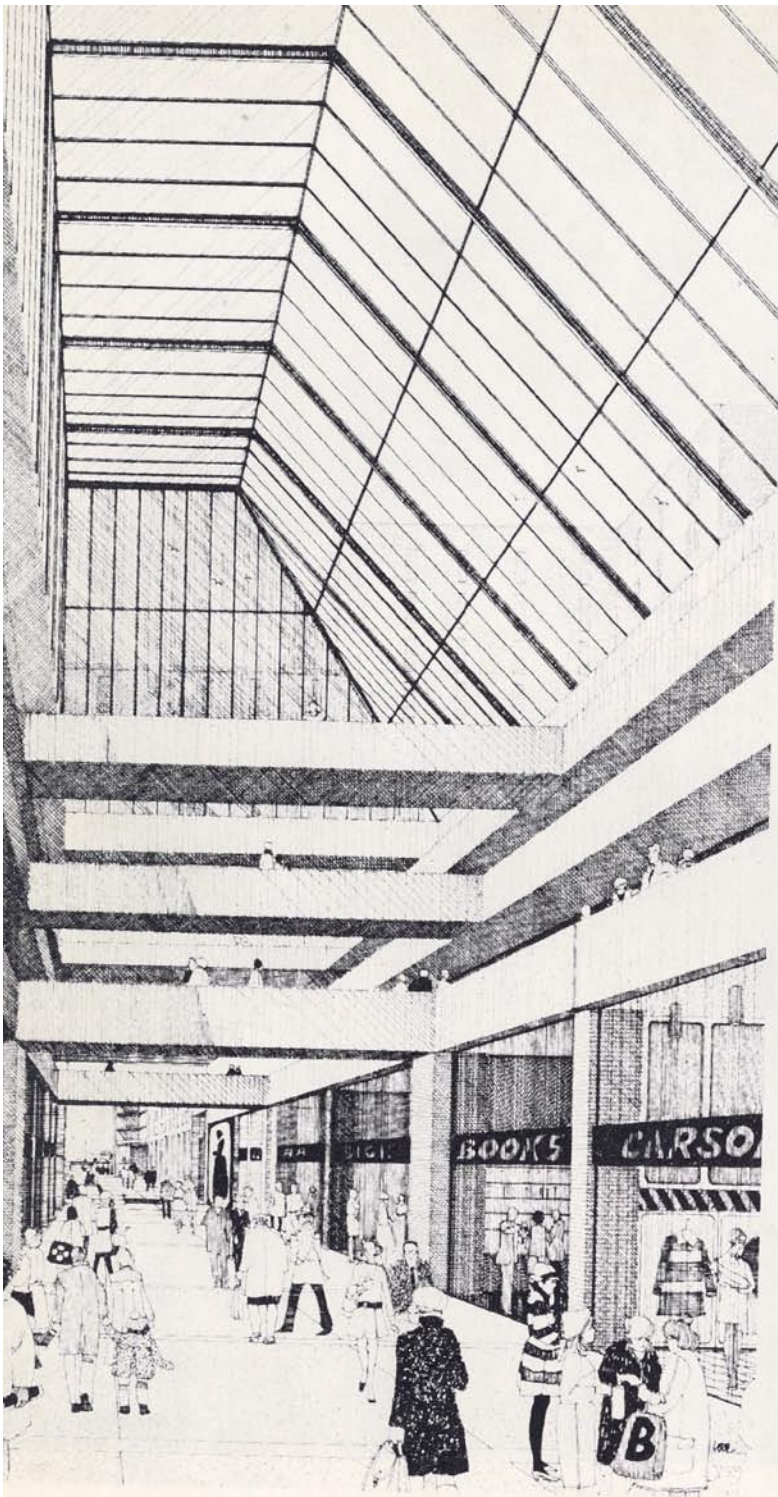




Private vehicles will be excluded from the island in the Johnson-Burgee plan. A motorist entering the island from an existing bridge will park his car in a new, multilevel, 2000-car garage located at the northern part of the residential community. The motorist will then transfer to a minitransit system which runs down Main Street, the only street on the island. It is the physical spine and organizing theme of the town. As seen in the transportation diagram at left, Main Street wends its way south through the northern residential area and then splits in two as it passes through the southern part of

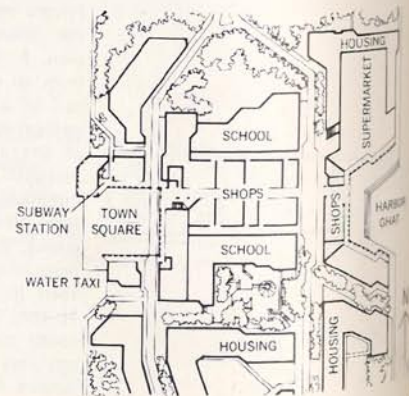
the island town. Apartments and townhouses are terraced up from a low four stories near the waterfront to a high 12 stories along Main Street. The apartment houses are arranged around U-shaped courts opening out to the water. Main Street, seen in the rendering at right, is dotted with neighborhood facilities, and it is not straight and monotonous. "It is bent," say the architects, "so there will not be an endless feel to it. Main Street is meant to always be an enclosed space, and to further this sense of enclosure, apartments bridge the street in two instances."

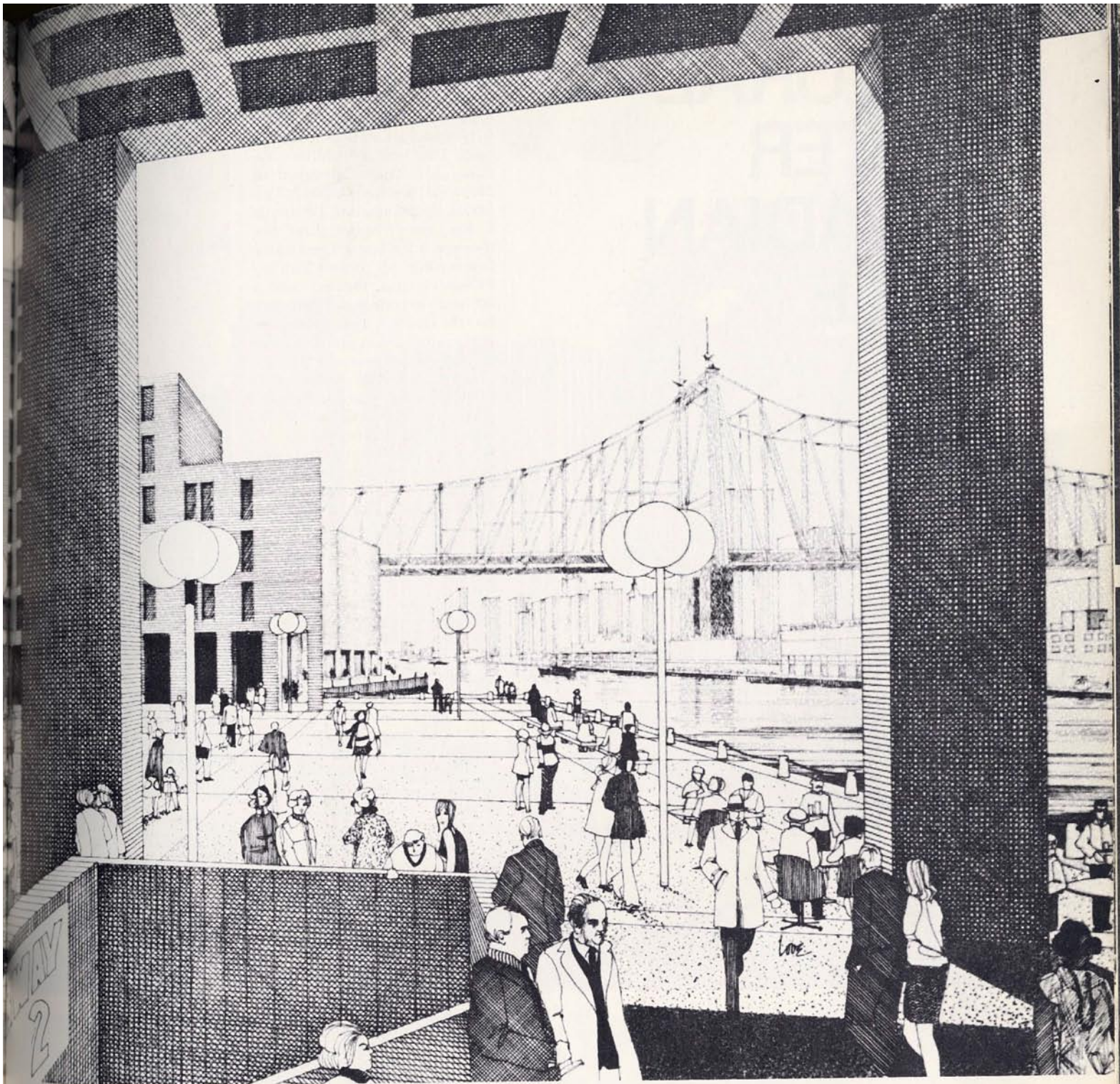




The focal point of the new town will be the town center with its public facilities, shops and waterside restaurants. The center is organized around a glass-roofed arcade, 20 ft. wide, 75 ft. high, and 300 ft. long, across the island. The arcade will open out at both ends into colonnades surrounding open plazas, with each end served by a minitransit stop. On the Manhattan side is the town square (shown in the rendering above), a 150- by 150-ft. pedestrian plaza with the new subway stop located below. On the Queens side is the harbor, an open-armed colonnade stepping down to the river. "In my

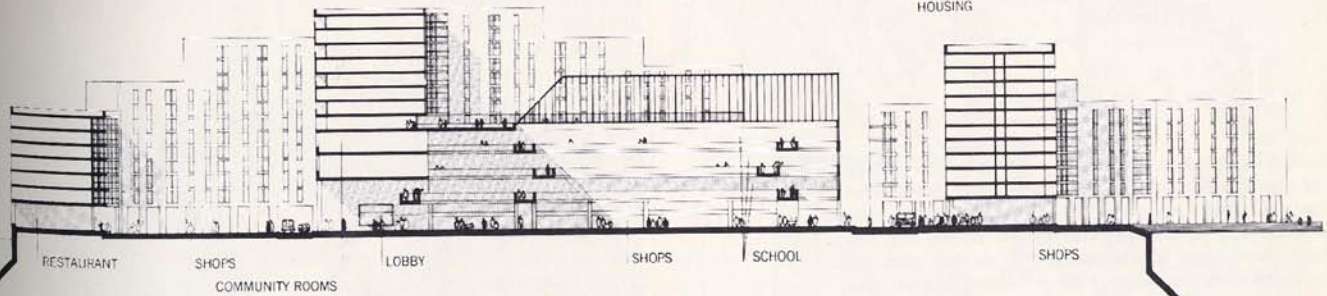
opinion," says Philip Johnson, "it's the whole dumbbell that's the important thing—the things that you arrive at on each side of the arcade. What people forget when they say how wonderful to have a *galleria*, is that the *galleria* is no good unless it's going from someplace to someplace." The island town is intentionally a dense development. The arcade is the principal shopping center, and it is bridged above by links between school facilities located on either side. Also in this complex will be a hotel, family clinic, swimming pool, fire house, branch library, and 200,000 sq ft. of office space.





HOUSING

HOUSING



EAST WEST SECTION