

POLICY AND DESIGN FOR HOUSING

Lessons of the Urban Development Corporation 1968-1975

Journal Article Evaluation: The Fabric of Roosevelt Island
by Steven R. Krog
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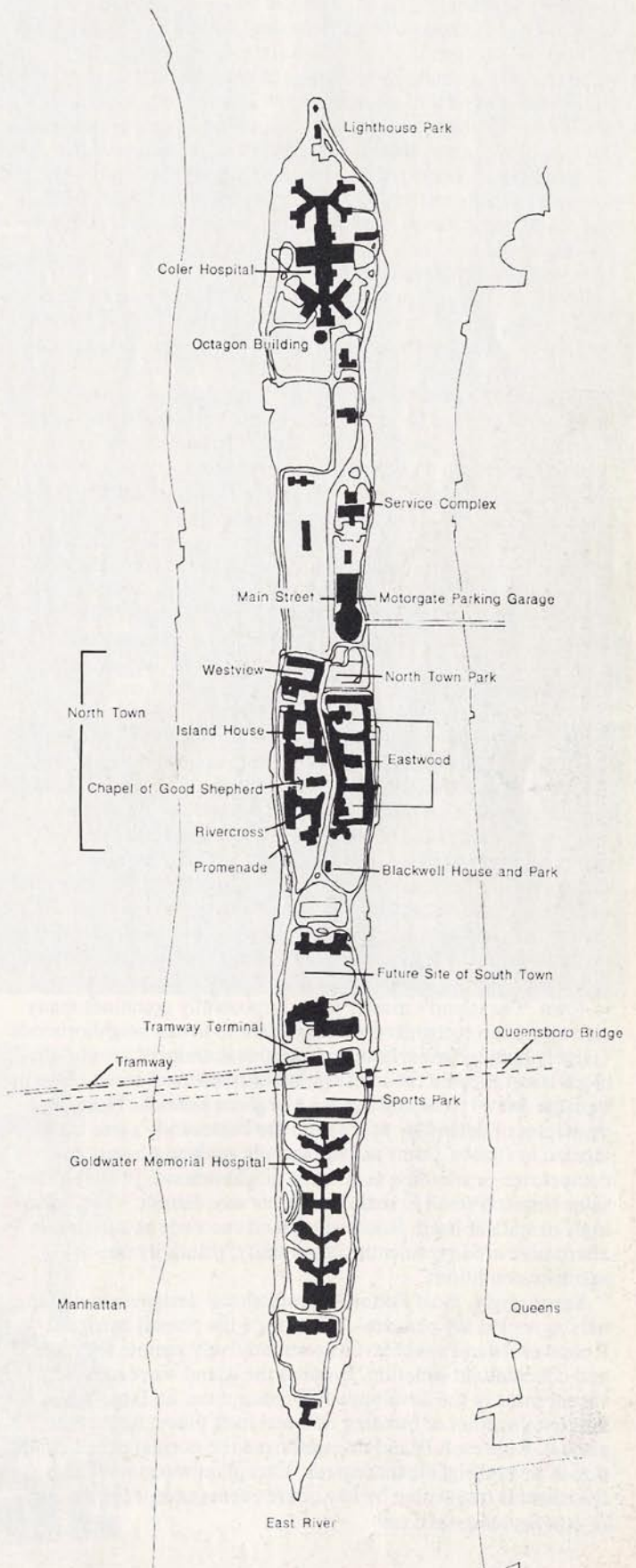
Evaluation: The Fabric of Roosevelt Island

A look at New York's experimental new town from a site planning viewpoint. By Steven R. Krog

Unabashedly described as a "deliberate attempt at social engineering" by Edward J. Logue, Hon. AIA, former president of the New York Urban Development Corporation (UDC), the Roosevelt Island "new town" is the home of 5,000-plus New Yorkers and the world's only commuter aerial tramway. Situated on a 146-acre island of the same name in New York City's East River, Roosevelt Island blossomed from a city planner's fantasy into a \$180 million residential community in a mere seven years, the first residents arriving in April 1975. To date, 2,100 dwelling units have been constructed by UDC and an additional and perhaps final 1,000 units (to be built by a private developer) are on the drawing boards of Gwathmey Siegel. A unique site coupled with experimental social and planning concepts raises myriad questions addressing issues in economics, politics, real estate, sociology, architecture, urban planning and site design. Roosevelt Island's answers at this early date are fascinating yet often predictable, provocative yet possibly misleading. Exploring Roosevelt Island in search of social and/or physical planning dogma reveals ever more questions, unexploited potential, unfulfilled dreams and a few brilliant gems. Let's uncover a few of each, first touching briefly on the island's general planning theory and then examining site planning specifics.

Purchased by the City of New York in 1828, Roosevelt Island, Welfare Island until the name was changed for obvious reasons, suffered the fate of similar inaccessible pieces of land in close proximity to urban areas—it became a repository for the city's outcasts. An insane asylum, poorhouse, prison and several hospitals (two of which remain) are all a part of the island's history. In 1968, the city studied utilization proposals running the gamut from a nuclear power plant to licensed gambling before giving UDC a 99-year lease as a prerequisite for constructing urgently needed housing. (UDC, it should be noted, was a corporation created by the State of New York to oversee, administer and expedite the financing, design and construction of housing in the state while circumventing much of the red tape seemingly inherent in such public endeavors.) A Philip Johnson/John Burgee master plan quickly followed and was supplemented by the input of educators, housing authorities and city planners, resulting in a community conceived "as an innovation and basic improvement on urban life." Although the latter point is arguable, Roosevelt Island has been relatively successful in providing a place where individuals of differing incomes, races and national origins coexist (much to the embarrassed surprise of real estate and banking authorities) as well as a living environment which entices middle-income families with children to remain in the city, another principal goal.

Ambitious without being pretentious, the Roosevelt Island embodied in the Johnson/Burgee master plan was diverse in land use and physical form. It was divided into two separate but interdependent urban "villages." South Town included the town center complex combining 200,000 square feet of office space, a 300-room hotel, 100,000 square feet of retail store area, a boat docking facility and a major plaza with approximately 2,000 residential units, while North Town remained essentially residen-



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Photographs by Steven R. Krog

A dream left truncated by the downfall of UDC.

tial with 60 percent of the total 5,000 units, basic staples being sold in small convenience shops along Main Street. All vehicles except those making deliveries were to have been deposited at the Motorgate Garage, electric minibuses providing the only motorized transportation on the island.

Main Street was to be the functional and symbolic spine joining North and South Towns. Views of and access to the river were to be maximized with the stepping of buildings from a high point at Main Street to a low point at the river's edge, with pedestrian promenades adjoining each shoreline. Clustering of the island's physical plant would have allowed major parks to occupy the northern and southern tips of the island, capitalizing on their prominent, dramatic locations. Improvement of the island's limited access to Manhattan required investigation of every imaginable alternative. The least plausible, the aerial tramway, eventually proved most feasible. An as yet unbuilt subway connection was intended to eventually carry the bulk of Manhattan-bound commuters.

Roosevelt Island's present fragmented condition is a direct result of the now infamous economic woes experienced by UDC in 1974-75. The construction of South Town is not considered even a remote possibility in the near future, seriously tarnishing the Roosevelt Island "dream." Many tired-looking existing buildings scheduled for demolition remain in curious juxtaposition to the glossy, clean-lined North Town; and except for the modest Lighthouse Park, most site development outside North Town is incomplete or unstarted. Of the landmark buildings to have been restored, only the Chapel of the Good Shepherd (Frederick Clark Withers, 1889) has been completed, while the potentially magnificent Octagon Building (Alexander Jackson Davis, 1839) remains dilapidated. A recent recreational master plan, prepared for the West Promenade and Octagon Park by landscape architect Nicholas Quennell Associates as a prerequisite for a HUD grant application, is one of the few signs that Roosevelt Island will continue to expand and mature.

While wandering along Roosevelt Island's Main Street or reading the new town publicity brochures, visions of Jane Jacobs' neighborhood appear. And in fact, Philip Johnson, FAIA, has commented that his Roosevelt Island master plan was done during his "Jane Jacobs phase." To complement the illusion, a painting for sale at the Island's restaurant/pizzeria is that of a quaint European village. But Roosevelt Island is no more a European village than it is an urban neighborhood Jacobs would wish to see indiscriminately emulated. That we are fortunate for the former condition is the subject for another discussion; that the latter is true is a significant blow to the common notion that Roosevelt Island might herald the arrival of a model new town in-town. The island's master plan purposefully combines many characteristics recognized as destructive to urban neighborhoods (largely homogeneous land use, relative scarcity of around-the-clock street life and the interruption of traditional street patterns, to name a few); mere lip service was given to Oscar Newman's principles of defensible space; and the community's size can be labeled in Jacobs' terms as "too large in scale to possess any competence or meaning as a street neighborhood, [while] at the same time too small in scale to operate as a district." Yet, seemingly in spite of itself, Roosevelt Island succeeds as a desirable alternative urban residential community, primarily due to extrinsic conditions.

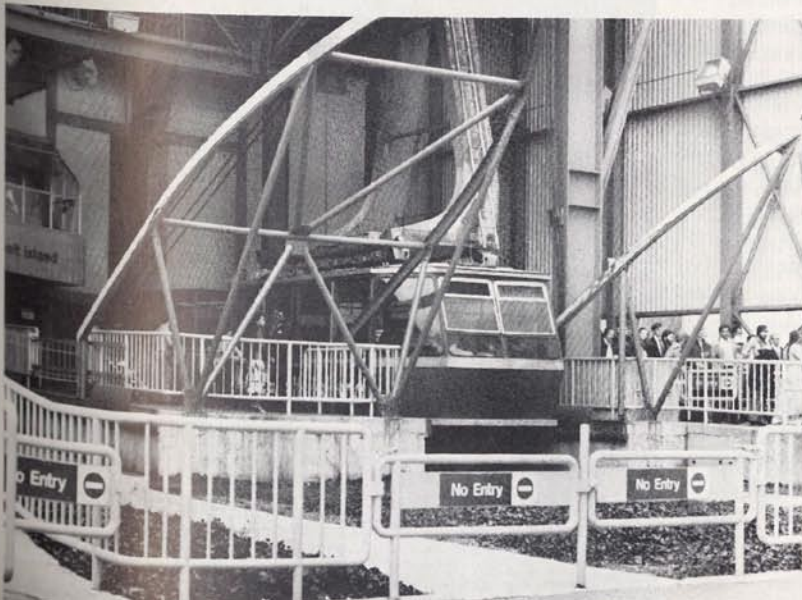
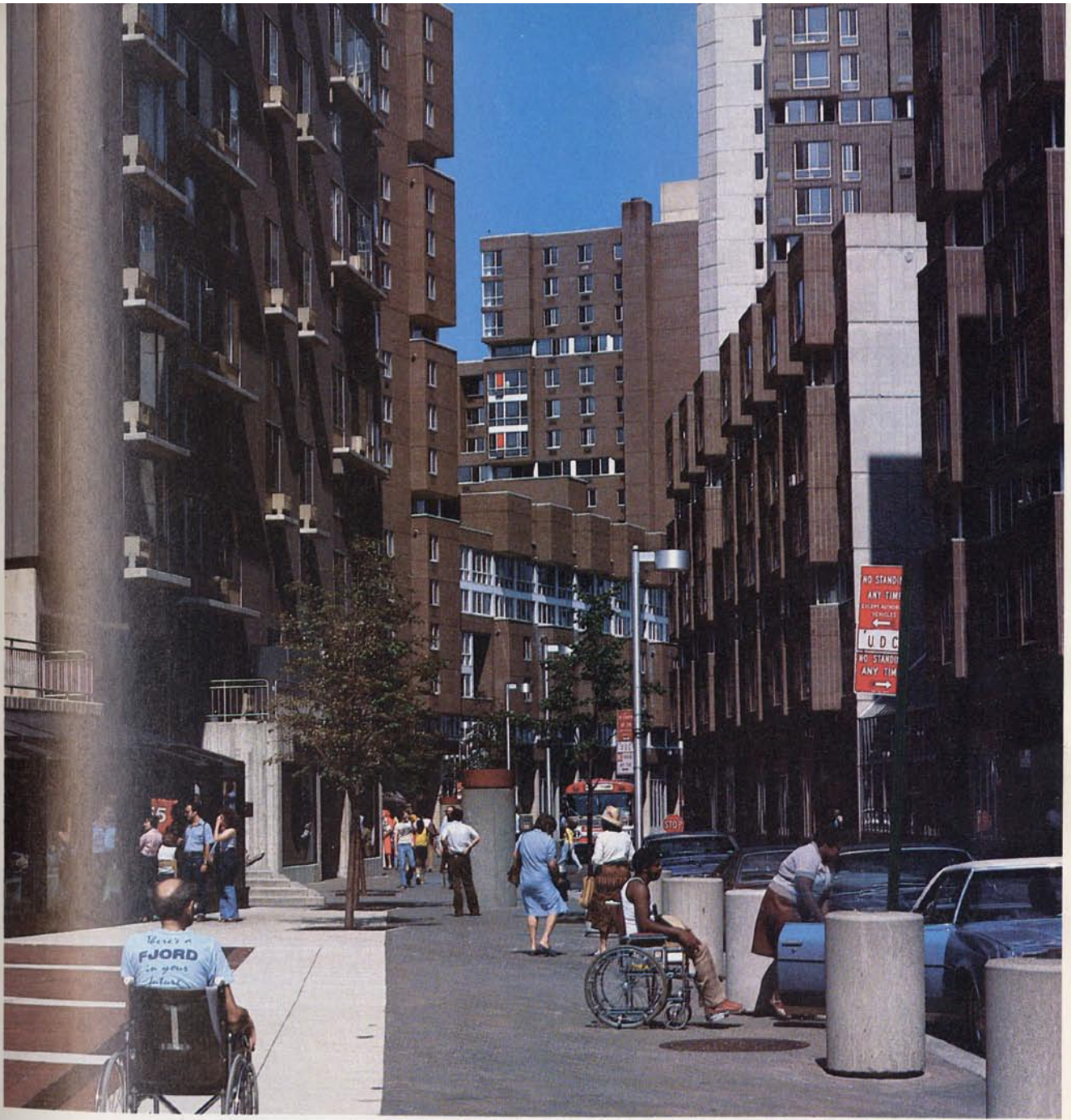
Surprisingly, most visitors—professional designers and planners as well as lay persons—fail to note the pivotal agent of Roosevelt Island's success: its comparatively remote location and concomitant isolation. Because the island was essentially vacant prior to the development's conception, no large-scale family relocation or building removal took place. As a built project, Roosevelt Island diverges from the normal urban condition in several significant regards. Except on warm weekends, the island is frequented by few nonresidents except for the curi-

ous. Vehicular traffic on Main Street, although an admitted problem during shift changes at Goldwater Hospital, is minimal. The island's restricted access is an unquestioned physical deterrent to much crime and a psychological stimulant to the residents' sense of security. (Escape for a criminal requires riding the tramway to Manhattan at 16 m.p.h. or crossing the single bridge to Queens, the gatehouse of which is manned 24 hours a day.) In addition, building entrances are under surveillance by an elaborate closed-circuit television system monitored by the island's own security force. To paraphrase Edward Logue, the prerequisite for a successful new town in-town is a substantial budget united with a vacant island in the middle of a river. The point is not that Roosevelt Island's responses to the complexities of urban planning are insufficient or erroneous, but rather that they do not address the proper questions. In fact, by virtue of its extraordinary siting, substantial budget and masterful planning concept, Roosevelt Island has elicited from its designers a singular residential community whose success simply happens to rely heavily on its physical isolation. Therefore, dispensing with the notion of the universal applicability of Roosevelt Island's planning principles does not amount to a categorical condemnation.

The very fact that Roosevelt Island has not been completed to the full extent of its master plan leaves the critic vulnerable to the obvious rebuttal that the parts built so far cannot be held liable for present inadequacies, for were its master plan realized, all but the most inconsequential flaws would be eliminated. The point is well taken. Lost as a result of the absence of South Town is the experience and potentially unifying magnetism of the town center which was to have married shopping, hotel and office space with a major plaza and boat docking facility. Similarly, the passive activity park areas remain undeveloped, prompting many adults to bemoan the insufficiency of quiet green spaces. And unknown is how effective the supportive influence of two residential clusters would have been in knitting the project into a more complete and truly new town. The following discussion therefore is concerned with one issue which legitimately lies open to our inquiry: the appropriateness, utility and appearance of the physical planning of the existing project as a home for 5,000 people.

The uninitiated visitor to the nascent Roosevelt Island is





Facing page, Chapel of the Good Shepherd plaza from Island House entrance; above, Main Street at North Town; left, the island tramway station.

Signs of impermanence and transience.

likely to note many of its gold rush town-like qualities. North Town's immediate context is made up of rock-strewn open fields and scattered vacant and semivacant buildings. The motorgate parking complex overlooks a burned-out building on which city firemen once honed their fire-extinguishing techniques, while elsewhere the riverfront promenade terminates abruptly at an abandoned roadway strewn with broken glass. Are the random empty storefronts along Main Street symptomatic of an expanding or of a declining community? Everywhere are signs of impermanence and transience which are the bane of master planners but which, to me, seem necessary and potentially important at this phase of Roosevelt Island's existence: "rough edges" which are ripe with direction-pointing information for students of new towns and urban living.

For example, it is my impression that the island's magnetism for families would be greatly reduced if its open areas, however overgrown, were not there. For children the island has the aura of an incomplete suburban subdivision where adventures can take place in the undeveloped, partially wooded building lots at the end of the street. Asked what they would like to see done with the currently undeveloped land on Roosevelt Island, residents frequently respond that it should be left to become wild and woody. Nonetheless, because "planning" seems to equate a desirable living environment with a programmed and manicured environment (preferably, also, a work of art), the master plan calls for the eventual eradication of such unkempt open spaces to allow for "beautification" of the island and the establishment of a sophisticated indoor/outdoor recreational/educational complex and other formal parks. Though one cannot criticize the master planners for lack of imagination, it appears that the real-life fantasy of planning a vacant island in New York City uncovered a wealth of proposals whose only shortcoming would be their effect of transforming Roosevelt Island into a miniature environmental Disney World. The obvious question is whether, for the residents, the island's desirability and attraction would be overshadowed and diminished by the program which was planned to someday evolve into a "World Awareness Center."

Some of Roosevelt Island's "edges" are comparatively "smooth" yet still tell quite a story. Main Street, originally conceived without curbs to reinforce the pedestrian nature of the community, was designed for "visual drama as much as for access" and to "stimulate curiosity and avoid the monotony of a long straight road," according to the Johnson/Burgee master plan. True to William Whyte's generic description of urban streets as a city's bloodstream, Main Street is indeed the forum for much activity on the island. Pedestrians, vehicles, mothers being exercised by their tots, skateboard daredevils, joggers and others are all common sights. But a brief perusal reveals that although Main Street stages much activity, its design promotes only *movement*. Benches, steps, stoops and ledges for sitting are scarce, making "people watching," an obsessive urban street pastime, difficult and uncomfortable. Even the tops of bollards are canted, discouraging use.

As Roosevelt Island's premier exterior space, Main Street's efficacy is further compromised by the arcades located east of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd and west of North Town park. The arcades shroud activity taking place in them, thereby subtracting arcade waikers from the total street scene. The transparent enclosure panels, though certainly welcomed during inclement weather, draw down the curtain of the highrise facade, placing an intermittent wall at the curb. It would be another matter if the arcade itself were a generous gallery which fostered comfortable participation in activities encouraged by or requiring a canopy. But it is not. Some 10 feet wide, the arcade is a mere corridor in which a single slow-moving wheelchair is a serious impediment to pedestrian circulation and where sitting on the inward-oriented benches affords little more than a momentary glance at passersby who walk within arm's reach. When

the arcade is crowded, the sitter becomes active in, rather than a relaxed observer of, the bustle. When the arcade is vacant, one can only sit and stare into the opposing storefront or restaurant as if window-shopping. As an acknowledgment of the need for protection from the elements, the arcade is welcomed; as a contribution to the life of Main Street, it falls short.

In certain respects Roosevelt Island exhibits signs of being a highrise suburb. Consider, for example, that "Main Street" is a bit of a misnomer for a street with stores that offer only a portion of life's essential commodities. There is a pharmacy, deli, dry cleaner, bank and two restaurants but no hardware store, book shop, clothing store, bakery or movie theater. Despite the compactness of North Town's development, as in a suburb, it is difficult to recognize precisely where the hub of activity exists, if it exists at all. Curt and unceremonial pedestrian and vehicular entrances to the residential core, succeeded by a relatively Spartan streetscape, allow the expectant seeker of bustling urban spaces traveling on Main Street to pass into, through and out of North Town almost before realizing he has arrived. The fact that vendors, fruit stands and other urban sidewalk businesses and entertainments are prohibited by the managing Roosevelt Island Development Corporation and/or by a population too small to support them further sterilizes and homogenizes the island. Acutely apparent is the lack of continuity and completeness South Town might have alleviated. We can only hope that Gwathmey Siegel's efforts will include a propitiously sited, multifaceted, effusive, yet nuclear gathering place which will be of communitywide importance.

While Main Street is disappointing in its lack of cohesiveness and concatenation, another of Roosevelt Island's building-to-site relationships, that involving the entrances to the residential highrises, furnishes a positive lesson in site planning. There are ceremonial gangplanks to Island House, modest Eastwood and Westview lobbies exiting under the Main Street arcade, long ramps approaching Eastwood's riverfront units and a discreetly formal, though slightly "cold," sunken plaza at Rivercross.





Left, an arcade on Main Street. Top, Main Street entrance to Island House in North Town. Above, an interior courtyard of Eastwood. Above right, the amphitheater set against apartments.

These entrances are an organizing force of significant dimension. In addition to their obvious function of ordering people's movement, they delineate principal spaces adjoining the buildings and coincidentally influence their use. The pleasing variety of sequential spatial experiences available to anyone strolling in North Town is largely the product of the placement of these doorways and the strategic employment of grade changes. In many instances, the act of leaving a building extends onto the adjoining plaza or sidewalk rather than concluding with the closing of the door. This helps obscure the sheer distinction between building and site, melting the buildings into their surroundings and into one another. If there is any complaint, it is that the success of these entrances and adjoining spaces works to the detriment of the more remote courtyards by siphoning away activity.

The North Town visitor will discover the building courtyards to be as dismal and inapposite as the entrance design and building siting are inviting and formative. Although Eastwood's exterior

appearance and interior layout are considered by many to be superior to the island's nonsubsidized buildings, its courtyards (all work done in-house by architect Sert, Jackson & Associates) are substantially inferior to those west of Main Street. Poorly handled grade changes, badly detailed pavements, drainage problems and an elaborate amphitheater of questionable value due to lack of lighting and electric outlets and its close proximity to apartments, combine to defile these potentially delightful and useful spaces. Token patches of grass, overrun by children's play because of their nearness to the residences, not because of their size, shape or layout, recently have been enclosed with chains. Perhaps a studied use of asphalt pavement and a few major trees and shrub masses might have been a more appropriate and less maintenance-intensive solution.

West of Main Street is better but still not brilliant. Working at Island House under architect Johansen & Bhavnani, landscape architect Laurence Halprin's New York office offers one row of benches in the shade of existing trees adjacent to the chapel but out of the mainstream of Main Street, and one grid of benches in a stark, perpetually shaded bit of space between buildings for which the term "courtyard" is but a euphemism. Due more to building locations than Halprin's work, the spaces encircling the



The constant joy of the adjacent Manhattan skyline.

chapel produce more of a corridor than a true plaza and do not substitute for the square to have been a part of the Town Center. Behind Rivercross (sitework by the office of landscape architect Dan Kiley) a lushly planted passageway is juxtaposed with a dreadfully barren, red asphalt-paved sitting space. In certain cases it appears that the designers had difficulty determining the explicit purposes of the courtyards: The larger spaces are too small to accommodate a crowd and the smaller spaces are too large to be intimate. In addition, west of Main Street the "hard" materials used in the public areas continue into the courtyards where a respite would be appreciated. This, coupled with building massing which prevents the penetration of sunlight, discourages use of these vital spaces.

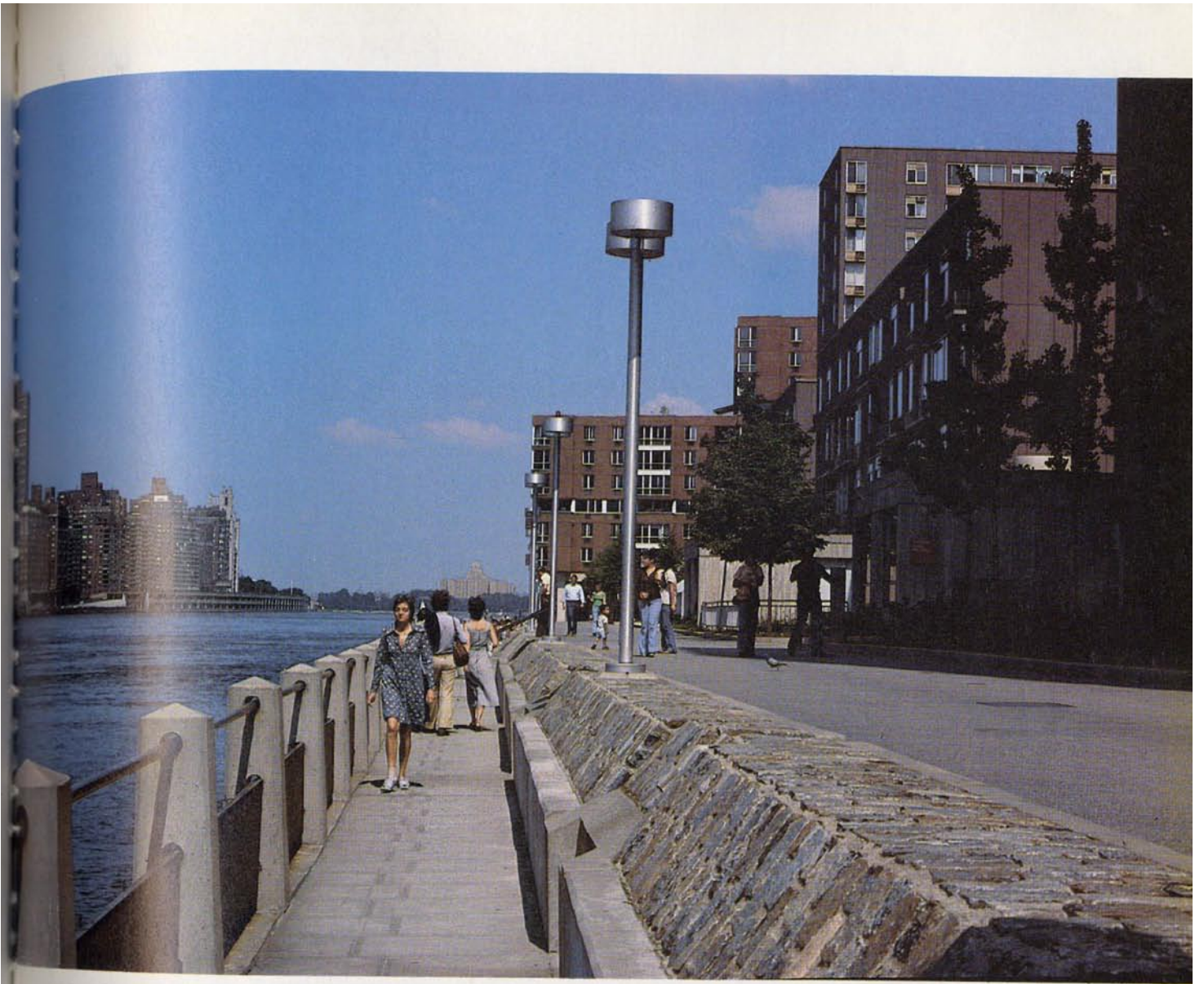
This fizzling-out of what was obviously a well intended design concept is enormously disappointing in light of the crucial role played by these spaces in the residents' use and enjoyment of the island's landscape. Because of a lack of attention at the master plan phase to the intricate requirements of these courtyards, their subsequent designers were placed in the unenviable position of being asked to foster, solely through the molding of limited parcels, activities discouraged by the community's overall environmental design.

While environmental design is incapable of compelling par-

ticular behavior, it can produce a stage which more easily facilitates those behaviors should users be so inclined. In Roosevelt Island's case, the courtyards' lack of spirit is largely the product of the magnetism of Main Street which monopolizes the residents, leaving the courtyards to languish as appendages. No solid reason is given to make use of the courtyards. Like the seldomly used open space so carefully incorporated into suburban new towns, the courtyards' most significant contribution to Roosevelt Island appears to be the residents' satisfaction in simply knowing the courtyards exist, regardless of whether they ever plan to spend time there.

In contrast, it is an unmitigated joy to emerge from between the residential towers on the western edge of the island and to dawdle along the promenade (designed by landscape architect Zion & Breen) with the Manhattan skyline laid out before you. Although site conditions mandated a narrower walkway than originally intended, the promenade and meditation steps (a part of Blackwell Park by Dan Kiley) provides ample access to the shoreline and an unimpeded view of Manhattan. Little used many days of the year, on a warm spring or summer weekend these areas are besieged by residents and nonresidents who never tire of the varied skyline and ocean-going vessels passing within 200 yards of the island.

Similarly, it must be a joy for the island's master planners to watch children, lunch boxes in hand, wandering along Main



Facing page, meditation steps and Queensboro Bridge. Above, the promenade and Manhattan across the East River. Left, Rivercross from the south.

Shortcomings that are easier to cite than to mend.

Street relatively safe from encounters with automobiles on their way to the minischools conveniently located in the residential buildings. Although both the physical and curricular characteristics of these schools have been the subject of intense controversy, from a planning viewpoint their small size and locations obviate many of the difficulties associated with urban schools by lessening the institutional image of school and by distributing the school-related activities around North Town.

Perhaps the most successful and certainly the most intensively used exterior spaces on Roosevelt Island are the North Town park and the tot lot in Blackwell Park. Cognizant of the weak functional but strong visual relationship between the park and Main Street, Nicholas Quennell Associates produced a lean but purposeful design featuring planting where three-dimensional substance is desired and a low retaining wall to control circulation, while making logical use of a subtle change of grade. A moment or two to enjoy the seemingly endless paddle tennis matches instills a bit of delight into the otherwise tedious supermarket-to-apartment trek. The strength of Blackwell Park's tot lot lies in the freedom it allows the children to play out of touch but within sight of their parents. The popularity of this play lot provides the best opportunity outside organized activities for parents to get to know each other.

There are few elementary solutions to Roosevelt Island's shortcomings. To indiscriminately install benches along Main Street may be more disruptive than productive. To disperse the Main Street shops around the island in hope of encouraging use of the buildings' courtyards would result in an inconvenient potpourri of spaces and uses. And the courtyards should not be redesigned without careful prior study. While I do not advocate the dismissal of the Roosevelt Island master plan, this community would seem the opportune site for systematic postoccupancy investigation before proceeding with any future island development.

I was disappointed that a Roosevelt Island Development Commission official was reluctant to see included in an informal residents survey circulated in preparation for this article a question regarding residents' desires for the future use of the island's vacant land. "We don't want the residents to think the master plan is open to revision," he commented matter-of-factly. Ironically, the single amendment made to the master plan as a result of residents' input—the substitution of North Town park at the site of a proposed residential tower—has been a resounding success, both functionally and esthetically.

Roosevelt Island warrants attention as it expands the meaning of "city." But those seeking in Roosevelt Island guidance to the future of cities will find only so far inconclusive experimentation. □



Top, North Town Park with 'Big Alice' electric generating plant beyond. Above, Blackwell Park playground. Right, North Town Park in front of the Motorgate Garage with the east promenade to the right. Facing page, the island across the East River.



