

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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201 E. 28th Street
New York 10016
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Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Last week Mayor Lindsay unveiled the model of Philip Johnson's development plan for Welfare Island which is now on display at the Metropolitan Museum. Welfare Island may become the physical testament of the Lindsay administration. Considering that the "Manhattan Arrangement" is an issue in the current campaign it seemed pretentious and a little unnecessary to show off the plan at the Museum.

At Johnson's request, perhaps in keeping with Thomas Hoving's centennial policy of urban involvement, the Museum made room for the show in the renaissance Blumenthal Patio. The whole setting oozed chic camaraderie and satisfaction with style for its own sake.

Mayor Lindsay did the honors with paternal pride. Big Blonde John, as some of his staff members call him, praised Philip Johnson as a creative genius for following the recommendations of the Lindsay appointed Schmidt Committee in preparing the plan. Philip Johnson said he loved doing it. Speaking for the New York State Urban Development Corporation, Ed Logue praised the Mayor for his vision in naming the Committee, and his wisdom in following its recommendations by inviting the UDC to do the job.

Logue alone mentioned the complexity of the project and the speed with which it has moved through the city bureaucracies. The lease turning Welfare Island over to the UDC is docketed for the Board of Estimate's October 23rd meeting. If passed, it means that eighteen months after the appointment of a study committee the plan will be approved and on its way. Because it involves no relocation, construction could possibly begin within another eighteen months. By New York standards that's greased lightning.

If it passes it will be despite the tony tone of the Metropolitan show. The exhibit is a scale model of the island showing the existing hospitals plus the proposal - housing for 20,000, a town center with commercial and educational facilities, and several new parks, including a 25 acre demonstration park of urban ecology, whatever that means. On the walls are diagrams of the plan, water color sketches of the buildings sufficiently interesting or historical to remain and be restored, and sketches of the future arcade and town center.

An outsize booklet accompanying the show, called "The Island Nobody Knows" contains the same illustrations plus enthusiastic references to the Ile de la Cité, the Galleria Vittorio Emmanuele, ghats (Indian water steps) and Ghirardelli Square. It is supposed to clarify the "concepts" of "urban ambience" which Welfare Island, the next great Urban Idyll, is going to be all about.

In other words the stylish Manhattan orientation of the project speaks loudly for itself. It appeals to people who will vote for Lindsay anyway and offends those who think ambiances take sick fat cats to the hospital.

Of course, Welfare Island IS part of Manhattan. Some have called it Manhattan's front yard. Really the island under the Queensborough Bridge, two miles long, only one midtown block wide and 500' from either side of the river, is the Upper East Side's window box. Since the city bought it from the Blackwell family for \$50,000 in 1828, the island has been New York's natural isolation ward - the pastoral setting for insane asylums, jails and hospitals.

The lighthouse at the northern tip of the island replaced a handmade fort as a line of defence against a British invasion imagined by "John McCarthy/Who built the light/House from the bottom to the/ Top all ye that do pass by may /Pray for his soul when he dies." He was confined to the insane asylum Charles Dickens scorned on his visit in 1842 and which, at the end of the century became Metropolitan Hospital. Nelly Bly wrote an expose of prison conditions in the 1880's. Boss Tweed himself was jailed there once - he had his food catered and a window cut in his cell so he could admire the view. There were prison riots in 1931. Metropolitan Hospital moved in 1952.

In recent years the island has been quietly rotting. Only two relatively modern city run hospitals for the chronically ill, Goldwater and Bird S. Coler, remain out there along with a Fire Department training school, empty old buildings, wildflowers, and the fountain contributed by philanthropist George Delacourte and, although unlicensed, named for him. The fountain will spew East River water 300' in the air. Since the East River is a running sewer the fountain's contributions to Fun City are being postponed.

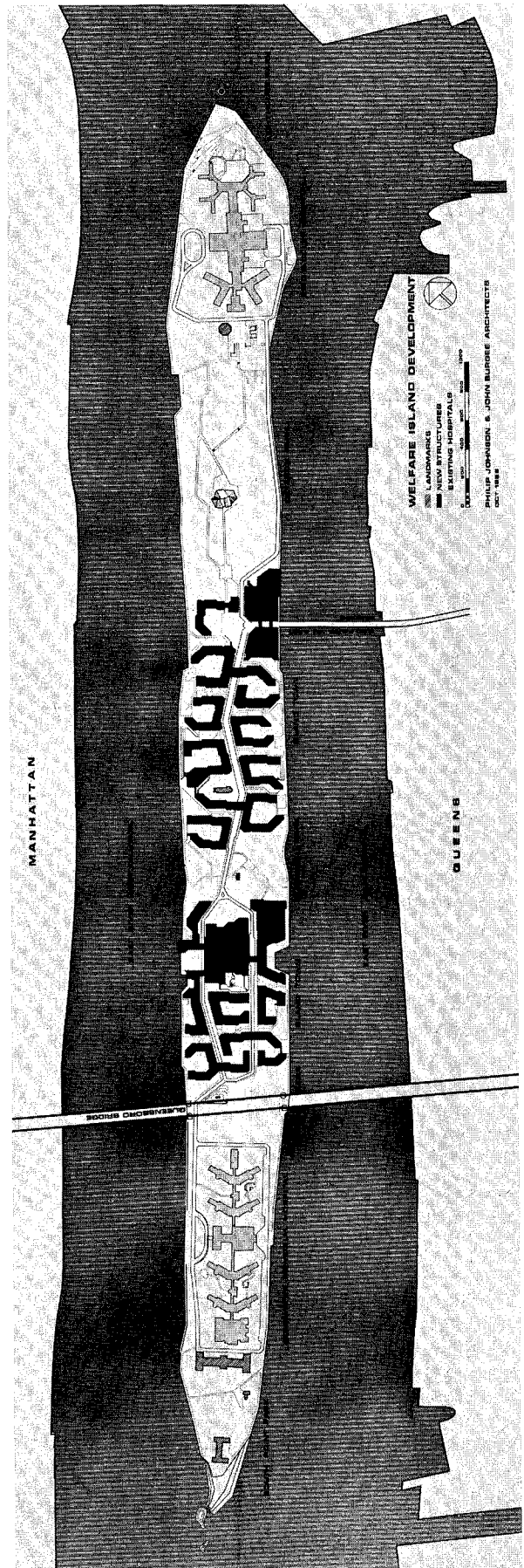
Right - A diagram of the proposed development plan for Welfare Island designed for the New York State Urban Development Corporation by Philip Johnson and John Burgee.

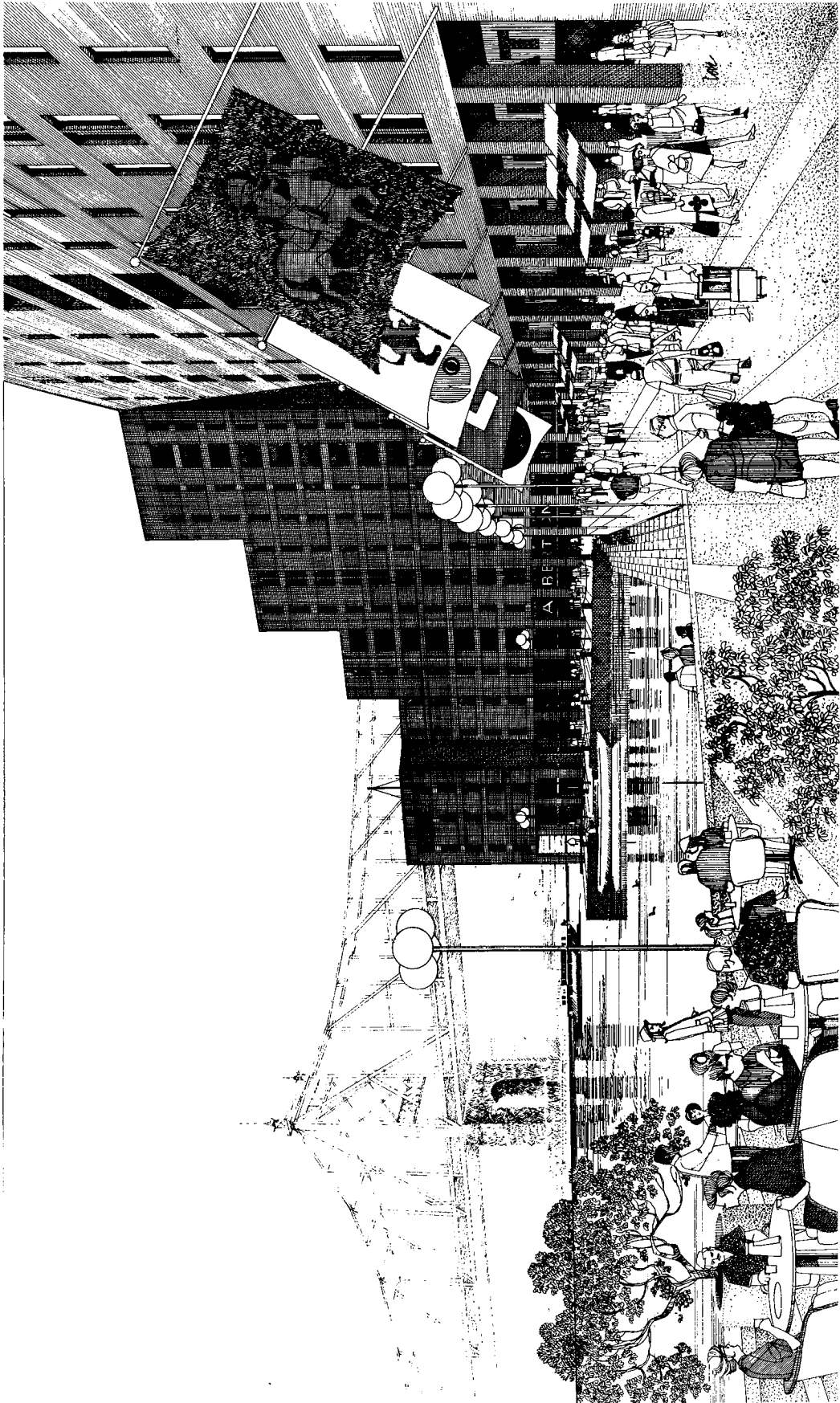
Notice that the U shaped apartment buildings will give every resident a water view.

The island's school will be above the shopping arcade.

page 4 - A view of the Island town harbor with the Queensborough Bridge in the background. The ghat descends into the East River.

page 8 - A sketch of the interior of the abandoned lunatic asylum which will be restored.





After Central Park and Riverside Park, Welfare Island is the third largest piece of undeveloped real estate in Manhattan. It's what entrepreneurs call "a helluva sexy site," a perfect case study for planners. It's an almost empty island in the middle of the city with no transportation and no sewers. A bureaucrat said "Parker Brothers ought to package it as a game so everybody can play."

Although(so long as the only way to get there was from the draw-bridge on the Queens side) the City never seriously considered them, there has been a steady trickle of grand plans for the island over the past ten years. Some were wishful thinking, at least one came complete with cost estimates and architects drawings. Faced with the looming reality of a new subway tunnel from Manhattan to Queens that will stop there, the Lindsay Administration chose to do something about Welfare Island.

The first thing the Citizen's Committee, called after its chairman, Benno Schmidt of the J.M. Whitney Co, did, was to raise \$175,000 from its members' personal and corporate coffers to hire David Lillenthal's Development and Resources Corporation to do a "value-free" assessment of the existing proposals.

The Schmidt Committee personified the "Manhattan Arrangement" Mr. Mario Procaccino cries about when stumping the rest of New York City. As the Mayor said, many of its members have a riparian interest in the island. Living and/or working on the Upper East Side, the committee members, a cross section of New York prominents, mostly liberal Republicans, shared a strong interest in getting something done.

The plans they considered all fell into two extreme categories: purepark, or experimental high density. The purepark-public open space plans ranged from a Tivoli Gardens type amusement center to a greensward scheme Con Edison fancied to top an underground nuclear power plant, or a domed sports stadium. The latest entrant in that category was for a cemetery to relieve the congestion of the dead in other parts of the city.

On the high density side the proposals included a University or United Nations center, a penal colony, or housing an commercial development for 150,000or more people. Herman Kahn, who fancies city building these days, is pushing the most complicated smorgesbord development plan for the island.

Three factors beyond politics strongly influenced the Schmidt Committee in preparing its report. The City is unlikely to find the minimum of \$170,000,000 necessary to move the existing hospitals at today's prices, let alone tomorrow's even more inflated ones. A true Tivoli Gardens in New York would have to be someplace in midtown, probably around Rockefeller Center, not on an island. And, bridge connections to the island from Manhattan are infeasible.

Plans for Ponte Vecchio type connections to Welfare Island abound, but they confuse the East River with the Arno. The East River isn't a river. It's an ocean strait, with ocean currents, ocean size shipping, and the Army Corps of Engineers -- the most powerful independent agency in government--standing guard.

The Schmidt Committee conclusions follow the logic of a moderate something for everyone. Keep the hospitals -- and make the rest mostly parks, plus enough housing and commercial development, in Schmidt's words "to keep the parks in use during the week." The rest of the design is poesy.

What made the report unique was a "how to" section, specifically suggesting that a special subsidiary of the State Urban Development Corporation would be an appropriate agency to carry out the development.

In the year after its creation, over the Mayor's objections to its super powers, Ed Logue's Urban Development Corporation has been quietly picking up projects all over the state, making friends, and biding its time for a spectacular metropolitan entrance. (See ERL -21) With Jason Nathan of the City's Housing and Development Administration as Cupid, Logue and Lindsay re-discovered "a mutuality of interests" to bring UDC into town in style.

Using Welfare Island, the most visible urban development project in the nation so far as the tastemakers and media men of Manhattan are concerned, as the ace, the City was able to drive a hard bargain with Logue. According to the memorandum of general understanding they signed last May, the UDC gets to develop Welfare Island, but takes on seven scattered difficult and unglamorous jobs elsewhere in the city as well. Who will hear of Arverne Urban Renewal or Coney Island Vest Pocket?

The UDC paid for the development plan which Philip Johnson is showing as a work of art. When the contracts are signed and the Welfare Island Development Corporation, eleven of whose board members, including the ex-officio city representatives, will shift over from the old Schmidt Committee, is created as a UDC subsidiary, the next step will be bidding for design contracts for specific sections of the plan.

The Schmidt Committee plan -- Philip Johnson model is a simple striation of the narrow island into bands of activity spaced by bands of green. There will be a motorgate repository for cars near the bridge from Queens, and a mini transit system for getting around the island.

The housing mix approved by the City and the UDC is moderate: roughly 30% low income, 20% moderate income (federal subsidy under section #236 plus New York State Mitchell-Lama financing), 20% straight Mitchell Lama financing which is now called middle income and means 50\$ a room in New York City, and 25% so-called conventional housing, which means luxury prices of \$125 per room and up, up, up.

Two differences in housing intent cannot be seen in the model, but, if pursued, will affect the social mix. Logue, whose staff eagerly looks forward to moving families, and offices, out to the island while he supervises from his new East End Avenue apartment with an overlooking view, wants to build a high proportion of family size apartments with two or more bedrooms at all price ranges. That could mean a real island of family living.

Philip Johnson hopes that from outside you won't be able to tell which of the 4 to 12 story apartment buildings are subsidized and which are luxury priced.

The Museum brochure with all its European allusions somehow missed the appropriate analogy. Welfare Island may turn into an American Tapiola. Tapiola (see ERL-8) is the garden suburb just outside Helsinki, Finland, which "proves" that in an ethnically homogeneous population, with a national passion for good design, people of mixed incomes can live together in a beautiful environment.

Although its scale, only 17,000 people, makes it too small to serve as a practical model, Tapiola is famous as a jewel-like social and aesthetic achievement. Moreover, it brought glory and an international reputation to its founder, a thought which has occurred to Ed Logue.

The proposed mix does not mean that there will be a full social mix or spectrum on Welfare Island any more than there is in any newer part of the city. The really poor can't get into public housing projects because the rents are too high for them. The really rich wouldn't dream of living near even the moderately poor.

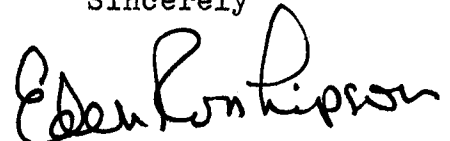
The island town planned for Welfare Island will be small and separate from the rest of the city. In theory all the children will go to the public school on the island. It could turn into an interesting experiment; it certainly will be different from the rest of New York. Imagine living in a park with fantastic views of the skyline and water only one subway stop from the Bloomingdale's Cultural Complex. Social scientists may go wild studying what happens.

The Schmidt Committee justified its moderation with the theory that moderation is somehow less than final: someday the City could change its mind and either turn the island into a park by replacing the hospitals and the new proposed island town, or build higher, higher and higher.

Ed Logue, who, after all, knows the politics of urban renewal better than anybody else, knows better. "Once you get 5,000 families living out there," he says with a twinkle, "you've got a community. A constituency. And they will fight for it. No one will ever touch Welfare Island again."

Sincerely

Received in New York on October 15, 1969.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Eden R. Johnson", written in a cursive style.

