EAST ISLAND
A proposal for the conversion of Welfare Island, New York to a residential community

On the following pages are represented the results of exploratory studies undertaken on the basis of an idea conceived by

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These feasibility studies and the planning and architectural concepts which resulted from them were developed by

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“Seventy-three out of 258 central cities lost population in the decade of the fifties when our urban population as a whole grew rapidly. Other powerful trends have been eroding the central cities over a much longer period.

“If the cities are to recapture their economic health, they must offer better opportunities for these commercial, industrial and residential developments for which their central position is a distinct advantage.”

President John F. Kennedy
(in his Special Message to Congress on Housing and Community Development, March 9, 1961.)
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Welfare Island today
INTRODUCTION

1. The concept envisages the conversion of the land area of Welfare Island, with the exception of the northerly tip of the island on which the Bird S. Color Hospital is located, into a model residential community with all suitable accessory facilities.

2. The development is visualized as being a middle income community developed within the framework of Federally-assisted urban renewal.

3. In order that families with children may be attracted, the greater number of units will be of three-bedroom and two-bedroom type, with a comparatively small number of one-bedroom and efficiency units.
HISTORY

The Island, presently named Welfare Island, has a colorful history. The Indians named it Minnahomonock. They sold it in 1637 to Gov. Woultcr Van Twiller. Gov. Stuyvesant voided the Indian sale to Van Twiller in 1652 and granted the Island to Capt. Francis Fyn by order of the West India Company with the purpose of preparing it as fortification against the English. At that time the Island was called Fyn Island.

When Fyn capitulated to the English in 1665, the Island was confiscated. In 1668 it was granted to Capt. John Manning, who promptly changed its name to Manning Island. In 1673 Manning surrendered the city to the Dutch. He was court martialed, disgraced and sentenced to spend the rest of his life on the Island. It seems that Robert Blackwell married a stepdaughter of Capt. Manning and took possession of the Island, which from then on was referred to as Blackwell Island. In 1784 a grandson of Robert, namely, James Blackwell, offered Blackwell's Island for sale. The advertisement read:

“A healthy situation and many fish and fowl caught here. Two small dwelling houses, a barn, a bake-fowl house, cyder mill, orchard of 540 fruit trees... pears, plums, peaches and cherries. A number of the best stone quarries already cleared to begin work immediately. A complete set of farming tools and quarry utensils and stock. Running springs of most excellent water abound; 107 meadows, eight of which are salt meadows. Whole improved with manure in a good fence (sic). Inquire of Mr. Joseph Hallett, 204 Water Str. or on premises of James Blackwell.”

There were no offers. After various attempts of the insolvent Blackwell family to get rid of the Island, it was in 1823 deeded for $30,000 to James S. Bell, who, in 1828, conveyed it to the Corporation of New York for $32,500.

However, Bell's widow, Magdalene, contested the transfer and on September 11, 1844, her suit was settled by payment of an additional $20,000.

The city used the Island as a penitentiary and by 1921 it had acquired an evil reputation. It was described as a “sin-steeped pile” and as a club house for gangsters. In the early 1930's Joey Rao, a Dutch Schultz gangster, was an inmate controlling with his friends the penitentiary and living in considerable style. There was wide open traffic in narcotics on the Island, the gangsters had suites in one of the old hospitals and their own garden plots overlooking Manhattan.

This state of affairs was abruptly ended in 1934 when Mayor F. H. LaGuardia's new Commissioner of Correction raided the penitentiary and broke up the Rao gang. Two years later the last of the convicts were removed from the Island and taken to the new jail on Ryker's Island. Since then the Island, under the name of Welfare Island, has been used for hospitals, nurses homes, and other welfare institutions of the City of New York.
LOCATION AND SIZE

The Island encompasses an area of about 167 acres. With a length of approximately 10,500 feet, it stretches along the eastern rim of Manhattan from 48th Street to 86th Street. It is separated from Manhattan by the west channel of the East River which varies in width from 600 to 850 feet. The eastern boundary of the Island is separated from Queens by the east channel of the East River. It is connected with Queens by a bridge built in 1956. The Island is also approachable from the Queensboro Bridge by means of elevators.

Seen from the air, the Island resembles with its cigar shape, a tremendous ocean liner, ten times as long as the Queen Elizabeth, lying at anchor along Manhattan. Its location is of singular quality. It is only a short distance away from the bustling life of Manhattan’s midtown business and office district and the United Nations Building complex, and not far from the Civic Center and financial district of Lower Manhattan.
PRESENT LAND USE

Only a small part of the Island is in actual use at the present time. Much of it, as an article in the Herald Tribune of July 4, 1960 stated, “is a melancholy wasteland of deserted hospitals, poorhouses and churches.” Near the extreme northerly and southerly ends of the Island are two hospitals—the Bird S. Coler Memorial Hospital of rather recent construction, and the Goldwater Memorial Hospital constructed in 1939. Near the Goldwater Memorial Hospital is situated a nurses’ home, a central laundry, a central heating plant and a fire station. Adjoining the Queensboro Bridge there exists a structure containing automobile elevators (no longer in use) and four passenger elevators, of which three are in use. One old building is used as a residence for sixty wayward girls. An area of approximately ten acres is utilized by the Fire Department as a training ground. The remainder of the Island is either open land or is occupied by abandoned and deteriorating structures and a profusion of weeds.

Coler Hospital contains 1890 beds, Goldwater Hospital 1338 beds. The hospitals employ about 3,300 people, 85 percent of whom live away from the Island.

The following statements regarding the desirability of Welfare Island for present uses and proposals for improvement of conditions are contained in a report written by Ralph E. Snyder, M.D., President and Dean, New York Medical College:

“The problems and difficulties connected with attempting to operate the two existing Hospitals, or any other hospital facility on Welfare Island under present conditions are nearly insurmountable. It is virtually impossible to provide and maintain medical care of quality that can and must be available to the citizens of our community in all City hospitals. The remote locations of these facilities, combined with grossly inadequate transportation facilities, make recruitment of required professional and non-professional personnel impossible, even with wage differentials. The fact that personnel in required categories of doctors, nurses, technicians, and ancillary supporting areas are in short supply and are expected to remain so only serves to aggravate the already existing serious problems.

“The problem of health care of the aged and chronically ill is recognized and accepted as one of the major problem areas of health care. This area has largely been neglected to date. Programs for care and treatment of such individuals must always be focused on helping the individual to regain and maintain a productive place in our society, reasonable independence, identification with community responsibility, ready access to friends, associates, and relatives, and freedom from the economic dangers of prolonged hospitalization.

“An opportunity for the development of a pilot project to demonstrate the latest and most important forward step in tackling these problems exists on Welfare Island. Bird S. Coler Hospital is a comparatively new structure opened in 1951 and represents a very fine facility for hospital care of the aged and chronically ill. The newness of the facility precludes its elimination from the point of view of economic responsibility. Goldwater Hospital, on the other hand, is a much older structure and is already outdated in terms of modern utilization.
“Within both Coler and Goldwater Hospitals there are a large number of patients that do not have to be hospitalized. Logically, it would seem that the only patients who should be in hospitals are those who require hospital-type care. The patients in both Coler and Goldwater Hospitals who require hospital care can be concentrated at Coler Hospital, with the hospital functioning as a specialized hospital (not a homestead facility) for these patients. Adjacent to the Hospital two specially designed facilities will be erected. These structures will be designed to meet the special needs of senior citizens and the chronically ill who can maintain some form of independent, dignified, personal living with a home of their own. That such facilities can be designed and built has already been proven.

“Such individuals do require more ready access to medical care than the average individual. This medical care can be provided through the use of outpatient clinic facilities located at adjacent Coler Hospital on a 24-hour basis. Professional and nonprofessional personnel become much more readily available because of living facilities which will be available on Welfare Island for those who will participate in such a program.

“A triad of health care facilities as envisioned by the use of Coler Hospital as a hospital, and two specialized living facilities represents a very real opportunity to develop a forward-thinking program to match problems of medical care in the areas of the geriatric and chronically ill individuals.”
MAJOR PROBLEMS FACING NEW YORK CITY

A. Loss of population, especially in core area. The 1960 census has dramatically demonstrated that New York, like many other cities in the United States, is losing population, which is wandering off into suburban areas of the Greater New York region. This loss is particularly notable in the core area and specifically in Manhattan. (The population of Manhattan has decreased between 1950 and 1960 by approximately 262,000).

B. The flight of middle income families. Even more significant than population loss is the remarkable shift in the economic status of Manhattan's inhabitants. The number of lowest income families has increased, the number of highest income groups has remained stable, but middle income families have left Manhattan in large numbers. The danger threatens that Manhattan might become a place where only the poor and the very wealthy will live. The phenomenon of the flight of middle income families may be attributed to:

1. The inconvenience and dangers resulting from ever-increasing mechanized traffic.
2. The reluctance of parents to send their children to school because of the hazards of street traffic.
3. The shortage of middle income apartments.

C. The problem of finding sites for middle income housing. In densely built-up Manhattan, land costs are so high that appropriate sites for middle income housing are hard to find. Wherever new developments are being built, large scale demolition can hardly be avoided. For every ten new housing units created in Manhattan during the last ten years, nine have been demolished.

D. Relocation problems resulting from projected redevelopment projects. Great difficulties are encountered in redeveloping blighted or partly blighted areas because of the problem of relocating the residents now living in such areas.

E. Traffic congestion. A large percentage of the wage earners of middle income families that have moved out to the Greater New York region use the automobile to get to work. This involves heavy additional traffic loads for a street system already nearly filled to capacity during rush hours.
THE CONTRIBUTION OF EAST ISLAND TOWARD SOLVING SOME OF THE PROBLEMS OF NEW YORK CITY

Many of the middle income families who have moved to suburbia have done so reluctantly and suffer from the sacrifice involved in bothersome and time consuming commutation to work, or to shopping, cultural and recreational activities. In order to bring these reluctant suburbanites back into the city, it would be necessary to eliminate the conditions that brought about their departure.

The concept of the East Island community is designed to meet this challenge by offering significant answers to the problems cited.

- It establishes, in the immediate vicinity of Manhattan’s business center, a large residential community self-contained with respect to schooling, convenience shopping and social and cultural facilities.
- It creates a superior urban environment completely free of interference from mechanized traffic.
- It provides means which will make available swift and convenient transportation from the Island to all parts of New York and specifically to Manhattan.
- It provides apartments large enough for families with from one to four children.
- It provides these apartments at rental levels suitable for lower to medium middle income groups. A significant portion of the rental units will be constructed on the basis of the Mitchell-Lama Law legislation with rentals around $25 per room. Other portions will be constructed utilizing various titles of FHA legislation. The proportion between low and medium rentals will depend on the wishes of the City authorities.

Further advantages accruing to the city will be found in the following:

- The East Island Community concept increases the residential population of Manhattan about 5 percent. This additional middle income population will be of considerable aid to the business and cultural life of Manhattan. Department stores and shops will gain customers; theaters, restaurants, concert halls and movie houses will gain visitors.
- It makes it possible for a large number of middle income families, especially those who make their livelihood in Manhattan, to return to the city.
- It provides an eminently suitable site for middle income housing.
- It represents one of the rare redevelopment sites not involving any residential relocation problems.
- The income which will accrue to the City of New York as a result of its implementation will provide the City with the opportunity to create modernized high quality geriatric facilities.
- Because the residents of East Island will have easy access to their places of work by public transportation, it will cut down significantly the number of automobile users and thus assist in the solution of traffic congestion.
Welfare Island today

Model illustrating development concept of East Island

(Both photographs taken from the same point of view, with Manhattan in the background)
THE EAST ISLAND COMMUNITY CONCEPT

A. Architectural

The concept provides:

1. The construction of a concrete platform covering most of the land area, and raised about 22 feet above the existing ground level. The space below this platform would be utilized for those purposes which usually are placed into basement areas—such as mechanical and electrical equipment and storage facilities. In addition, this space would also be utilized for those facilities usually found on a main floor, such as building lobby, commercial facilities, etc.

2. Along the perimeter of the space below the platform would be placed schools of all types from kindergarten to high school, with windows directed toward the East River. These schools could be two stories high, with playgrounds directly above, on top of the platform.

3. In a central location and running the entire length of the community area would be a wide and airy concourse connecting all building lobbies with each other. On the balcony level of this concourse would operate the internal transportation system, discussed in greater detail later. Reachable from this concourse area would be all building lobbies, all schools and such public facilities as public libraries, police and fire station, and post office, as well as shopping facilities, medical, dental and other professional offices and recreational areas like bowling alleys, movie houses, meeting rooms, auditoria, etc. Many of the above mentioned facilities would be skylighted.

4. Below the platform would also be located a goods handling system operated by means of conveyor belts. This system would handle trash removal, moving of furniture, moving of goods to the stores and apartments, as well as deliveries.

5. From the top of the platform would rise the residential structures. The scheme contemplates buildings of various heights, shapes and sizes. Along the edge of the platform are envisaged duplex town house structures. The concept proposes 50-story slab type structures and between them long stretched buildings of undulating floor plan varying in height from 8 to 30 stories. The building arrangement aims to achieve optimum vistas over the East River and toward the dramatic skyline of Manhattan. It also creates between the buildings attractive open spaces of various sizes, shapes and spatial characteristics.

6. The spaces between the buildings are to be of unusually generous size. (The 50-story buildings, for example, are set 800 to 1,000 feet apart.) These open spaces will be used by pedestrians and by emergency vehicles. They will be richly landscaped and will contain recreational facilities such as swimming pools, tennis courts, rest areas with benches, fountains, etc.

7. In order to provide full enjoyment of the views it is planned to use balconies, terraces, glassed-in sunrooms and bay windows for all apartments.

B. The Apartments

The total number of apartments contemplated is 20,000. Of these, 7,600 would have three bedrooms, 7,600 two bedrooms, 3,600 one bedroom, and 1,200 would be of the efficiency type. The average FHA room count is 6.45. The average size of the apartments would be 1,177 square feet. The apartments would be heated and air conditioned from central plants. Smaller apartments would have one bathroom, three- and two-bedroom apartments would have two bathrooms. Great flexibility exists with regard to rental schedules. By using all presently available tools and those which might become available through new legislation already introduced in Congress, a wide variety of rental conditions or cooperative arrangements can be developed in order to create an integrated community on varying economic levels. The determination of the number of units within various rental categories will be established in accordance with the wishes of the City authorities.

C. External Transportation

On the basis of an investigation made by Col. S. H. Bingham it was established that the 53rd Street tunnel of the Independent Subway line, which is routed
underneath the Island at an average grade of approximately 1.7 per cent, could be used to construct a new subway station adjoining the concourse area below the platform. High speed elevators of sufficiently ample capacity to transport the passengers from the station to the subway line could be constructed.

Col. Bingham states that the additional service required to accommodate rush hour traffic in the morning and evening, created by those residents of East Island who would wish to reach Manhattan or other parts of New York, could be accommodated by increasing the number of cars in trains now operating from ten to twelve and/or by increasing the number of trains during the rush hour from thirty per hour to thirty-two. (One each on the F and the E lines.) He further states that this service could be provided without difficulty, though it may require a slight change in the signal system between the Lexington and Fifth Avenue stations in Manhattan, at small cost. Col. Bingham further reported that the proposed new station, including high speed elevators, could be constructed in the concrete lined portion of the tunnel at an estimated cost of $2,600,000.

The subway station described above would serve the main traffic needs of the Island. However, transportation could be augmented by the following:

1. The three elevators now operating and the non-operating fourth elevator leading to the Queensboro Bridge could be modernized or replaced by high speed equipment. The present sidewalk on the Queensboro Bridge could be enclosed with glass or plastic to provide weather protection, and a “Speedwalk” (moving sidewalk) could be installed in both directions, bringing persons from the elevator stop to Second Avenue conveniently and speedily.

2. Large multiple-deck garages are projected, to be constructed near the Queens side of the existing drawbridge. The size of these garages could be tailored to the requirements of residents who wish to own and operate automobiles. In order to make these garages conveniently accessible, the installation of an enclosed “Speedwalk” using existing sidewalks on the drawbridge may be visualized.

3. Ferryboat service from the Island to new slips on the Manhattan side and to existing ones in the Wall Street area could be organized and operated by private enterprise if a demand for this type of transportation would prove this economically feasible.

4. An automobile road would be maintained between the drawbridge and the Bird S. Coler Hospital to serve ambulances, doctors’ cars and deliveries to the hospital.

5. Helicopter service could be installed if a demand should become apparent.

6. Other transportation possibilities, including a possible high level pedestrian bridge will be investigated.

These varied means of transportation will provide for residents of the East Island community extremely convenient and swift access to the business core of Manhattan and to all other parts of New York.

D. Internal Transportation

1. Movement of People.

The length of Welfare Island is approximately 10,500 feet. It’s width varies from 600-850 feet. Thus, there is no need to provide for mechanized transportation in the latitudinal direction but there is a requirement for speedy transportation between the Bird S. Coler Hospital and all residential and other facilities, and the subway station located above the 53rd Street line.

a. Internal mechanical transportation. As mentioned before, such transportation will be located on the balcony level of the main concourse. Various methods for achieving this mechanical internal transportation system are being studied. One study and proposal was submitted by the Stephens-Adamson Company of Aurora, Illinois. The system proposed by this firm is a “Carveyor” continuous transportation system with stations set approximately 900 feet apart. The system consists of individual platforms carrying seats, designed to move speedily between stations and to slow down near stations; in this way, a continuous row of seats is instantly available at the stations. The station stops would be reached by speed ramps leading from the lower level of the concourse to the balcony level. These ramps continue as moving sidewalks along the station platform, moving at the same speed as the “Carveyor” system at the stations. Thus, an easy and safe transfer is achieved from ramps and moving belts to the individual seats mounted on the platforms. The total travel
time from one end of the island to the other is estimated to be seven minutes. It is contemplated that such a system would be constructed and operated by the developer and would be amortized by charges collected through a turnstile system. Preliminary studies show that a five-cent charge would probably be sufficient to pay for amortization and operating costs.

b. **Foot traffic.** Residents living in structures close to the subway station would walk on the ground level of the concourse for short distances. All residents would have short walking distances to schools, stores, professional offices, churches and community facilities.

This internal transportation system combined with foot traffic would make it possible for all residents to reach the subway station or ferry slips, or the elevators to the Queensboro Bridge conveniently and swiftly. Most important of all, it would make it possible for children to reach educational facilities in absolute safety.

c. **Taxi terminal.** On the Island side of the drawbridge there would be established a main lobby area with adjoining transportation terminal for taxis, ambulances, doctors’ cars, etc.

d. **Emergency traffic.** On the platform surface, an emergency roadway for fire engines, ambulances police cars, would be made available.

2. **Handling of Goods.** For this purpose, as mentioned before, a conveyor belt system will be installed. It will have termination points at service elevator stops connecting it with all floors of residential structures, service areas of stores, and all other facilities in need of service traffic. The belt system will have its main terminal facilities in a lower terminal area located near the Island side bridgehead of the drawbridge. Here a goods handling terminal with trucking facilities will be established where goods can be transferred from trucks to the belt system. The goods handling system will also be utilized for trash and garbage removal, transporting same to a garbage handling dock from where it will be taken by barge to city dumps.

E. **The East Island Community Concept in the Framework of Urban Redevelopment**

Discussions with authorities indicate that it can be reasonably assumed that this project would be regarded as suitable for federal and state assistance under the Urban Renewal and Redevelopment legislation. It differs from most conventional redevelopment projects in one respect: namely that inasmuch as all land is now owned by the City of New York, the usual federal assistance for assembly of land and mark down of land cost will not be necessary. It is assumed that the federal agencies will recognize as land value the price which would be agreed upon between the developer and the City as being fair for the acquisition.

Capital improvements for which federal and state assistance should be made available would include but not be limited to the cost of public schools, public structures, police and fire stations, libraries, water distribution, sewage systems, subway station, demolition of existing buildings and amounts for costs in lieu of conventional street construction and street lighting. Including an allowance for contingencies, it has been roughly estimated that the total capital cost for which federal and state assistance could be applied for would be in the neighborhood of $35,000,000. With the federal assistance amounting to two-thirds of this amount and state assistance to one-sixth, it is thus estimated that the City’s contribution would have to be approximately $6,000,000.

F. **Fiscal Implications**

Preliminary calculations demonstrate a significant income from taxes far outweighing the annual operating costs and the cost of amortization and interest for the City's portion of the over-all redevelopment cost.

Thus, it can be predicted that the City will receive, after operating expenses, amortization and interest are considered, a significant additional net income.
FIGURES AND FACTS

A. Area

1. Total area of Welfare Island—167 acres.
2. Area for residential development—140 acres.
   (Both figures are calculated on the assumption that land area can be increased by filling space between existing land and the bulkhead line.)

B. Projected Structures

1. Residential:
   - 7,600 three-bedroom units
   - 7,600 two-bedroom units
   - 3,600 one-bedroom units
   - 1,200 efficiency units
   These structures contain, on the basis of FHA norms, 129,200 rooms.

2. Non-Residential:
   a) Schools. Eight elementary schools, each for approximately 825 pupils. Three junior high schools, each for approximately 1000 pupils. One senior high school for about 2,600 pupils.
   b) Parks. Two five-acre parks.
   c) Police and Fire Station. One combined police and fire station of about 600,000 cubic feet.
   d) Libraries. Three libraries, each of 150,000 cubic feet.
   e) Commercial. 500,000 square feet of retail stores for daily marketing goods and services. 24,000 square feet of office space (medical, dental and professional.) 200,000 square feet of general business space (bowling alleys, movie houses, private schools, etc.)

C. Development Costs

1. Supporting facilities:
   Schools, parks, police and fire station, libraries, and subway station to be constructed at a cost of approximately $35,000,000 with federal and state financial assistance. After two-thirds federal contribution and one-sixth state contribution, the City’s cost will be approximately $6,000,000.

2. Housing for the elderly and relocation of central laundry and central heating plant:
   To be undertaken by the developer at a cost of approximately $20,000,000.

3. New residential development, including all commercial, internal transportation, and accessory facilities:
   To be constructed by the developer at a cost of approximately $400,000,000.
SCHEMATIC GROUND LEVEL PLAN (BELOW PLATFORM)

SCHEMATIC LOWER LEVEL PLAN (SERVICE)

LEGEND

• S  Convenience Shopping
• C  Church
• ES  Elementary School
• JH  Junior High School
• HS  High School
• SF  Ferry Landing
• SS  Subway Station
• D  Distribution Area

— Internal Transportation
— 53 St. IND. Subway
==== Service Conveyor
SUMMARY

The East Island Community development will provide homes for 20,000 families, or approximately 70,000 people. Because of its superior environmental qualities, because of the absence of the nuisances and dangers of automobile traffic, because of the existence of modern, easily and safely reachable school facilities, East Island will attract large and medium sized families of middle income back to the city, into a model community from where they can reach their place of work, and the shopping, cultural and recreational facilities of Manhattan, easily and quickly. The development of East Island as a residential area will make a major contribution to the easing of the housing shortage, especially for middle income families. It will further result in a marked enlivement in the business, cultural and social life of Manhattan, with resulting benefits to the City of New York as a whole.

The problem of geriatrics care is one which will, sometime in the future, demand an overall solution. This may, in the opinion of medical authorities, suggest the moving of all hospital facilities to locations adjoining existing teaching hospitals. It is possible, therefore, that at a time to be determined by the City, the Bird S. Coler Hospital may no longer be utilized for geriatric purposes. Should the city ever make such a decision, then the residential development would be enlarged to include the northern tip of the island. At such time, the old age housing for the elderly could, if so desired, be converted into standard efficiency apartments.
This Corporation has been organized to implement The East Island Community Concept.

**The principals of this corporation are:**

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