One late afternoon in the early spring of 1975, a group of men and women will leave different offices in Manhattan and head for an express bus stop. After close to a 30-minute ride, they'll cross a newly painted blue bridge on to Roosevelt Island.

There's no telling how many people will have been to the island before them. For almost 150 years, it was really an island, a place apart, almost exclusively for convicted criminals and the tragically ill.

Once development of the Island started, others began coming to the island to work and visit. Their ranks have included construction workers, students, journalists, film makers, mayors, architects, members of Parliament and a Cardinal of the Catholic Church.

But, for the people who will be traveling to Roosevelt Island on this spring afternoon, the reason for going to the Island will be different. They'll be going home to apartments in the new community. By year end 1974, some 50 families and individuals have paid deposits and made preliminary applications for apartments in advance of the marketing program for the new community on Roosevelt Island. Some plan to live in apartments within easy shot of Rockefeller University, the east 60's and the 59th Street Bridge, as well as the tugboats, tankers and pleasure craft which traffic on the river. Others will look out on the river and Manhattan's upper east side, or the new community's Main Street.

Those who also have paid deposits include a State Supreme Court officer and his wife, a dentist, a policeman and scores of others.

By early 1975, these early residents will be going home to new apartments in the cluster of buildings on the two-mile island which runs parallel to Manhattan from 47th to 86th Streets.

They'll be coming to a place which writers have described as a "mini-Manhattan," or ile de la Cite. But, while it has some similarities to those more fabled islands and some landmark links in the past, Roosevelt Island with its new community has much stronger ties to the future. In fact, it is very much a part of the last quarter of the 20th century.
To a far greater degree than other urban communities in the United States, Roosevelt Island will be free from the fumes and traffic of private automobiles. Residents and visitors will park their cars at a garage at the island end of the Roosevelt Island Bridge, the island's "land" connection with the rest of New York City.

Vanished will be garbage trucks which normally clog traffic and muffle conversation on city streets. In their place an unseen pneumatic refuse disposal system will zip away garbage for compacting and removal.

Nearly noiseless and emission-free buses that run on electric batteries will provide on-island transportation.

No giant, mass production school here. Instead, the early settlers and their children will discover individual "mini-schools" which accommodate 225 on the average, contrasted with other urban schools where the pupil population averages over 1,000. Dispersed throughout the development, each of the five schools now ready to open will look out on the river and be within easy walking distance from the apartment buildings.

By mid-summer 1975, the Island will be a three-minute commute by air from Manhattan's east side. An aerial tramway now under construction, the first to be used for a large-scale mass transit in the United States, will be in service and available to Island residents, tourists and curiosity-seekers for the price of a subway ride.

Of course, the new community will also offer the basic hardware and necessities of life.

The first 2,100 of the 5,000 apartments planned will be completed and all are expected to be ready for occupancy by the end of 1975.

Essential services: electricity, telephone, gas, will be operable. Standing by to open their doors will be a health center, senior citizens center, three day-care centers, a supermarket, bank and a 1,000-car garage.

An express bus system will accommodate commuters to Manhattan until the tramway goes into service.
On the recreational side, park and recreational areas, including tennis and basketball courts, will be groomed for use.

Under construction at year-end 1974 was a full recreational and sports facility near the 59th Street Bridge. It will function for residents and the Island’s school system. It will offer a swimming pool, gymnasium, a football field, softball field, as well as handball and squash courts.

In all, more than one-third of the Island is planned for park and recreational use.

And, while the new community’s futuristic amenities speak for themselves, the Island’s link with the past is substantial. There are seven landmark buildings. One of them, Blackwell House, belonged to the original owners of the Island and has been fully restored.

Destined to become one of the Island’s most visited park site will be a memorial and garden dedicated to Franklin D. Roosevelt. The model and the drawings of the memorial were among the last works by the late architect, Louis I. Kahn. The Kahn design provides for a sloping park and a memorial.

Located at the Island’s southern tip across from the United Nations and looking down the East River toward lower Manhattan’s towers and the bridges to Brooklyn, the memorial will have few vistas, man-made or natural, that will be its rivals. The memorial has excited historians and architectural writers as have so many other aspects of the development of the Island.

In fact, few residential developments anywhere have enjoyed such a high degree of public attention and news media coverage. In recent months it has been prominently featured in articles in The Washington Post, The New York Times, and in such magazines as New York, The New York Times Magazine, The New York News Sunday Coloro section, as well as in the architectural journals.

Formal marketing of apartments will not begin until spring, 1975. But an information pavilion at 20 East 59th Street in Manhattan, opened on September 21, has received over 3,200 visitors and 1,000 written inquiries.

And, at year end 1974, Roosevelt Island was no longer a place apart but a part of the mainstream, and even perhaps something of a surprise in a City which knows few surprises.

The story of Roosevelt Island may some day serve as a model of how different agencies and levels of government can work together cooperatively to carry out an agreed plan.

Like many positive stories, it has gained few headlines. But what happened may be worth noting here.

In February, 1968, the Welfare Island Planning and Development Committee was formed. It consisted of 22 members—18 private citizens and four ex-officio members representing the City Administration.

The Committee assessed the needs of the City, and recommended the building of housing in a park-like setting, the elevation of landmarks and a subway connection for the Island.

The Committee suggested two alternative vehicles for implementation: (1) a special purpose development corporation like Battery Park City Authority or United Nations Development Corporation, or (2) a subsidiary of UDC.

In May, 1969, the City asked UDC to carry out the Committee’s recommendations.

UDC named architects Phillip Johnson and John Burgee to prepare a master plan; the City leased the Island to UDC which created the Welfare Island Development Corporation, now known as the Roosevelt Island Development Corporation.

In pursuance of the plan, there will be two major parts of the development, Northtown, most of which is now under construction, and Southtown, which will soon be designed. Northtown and Southtown will be linked by Blackwell Park, one of the five parks planned for the Island.

Now under construction are 2,100 units of housing; 1,000 for the elderly and for moderate and lower-income families, and 1,100 for middle and upper-middle-income families.

Roosevelt Island was designated a New Community by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in December, 1972. A formal project agreement was executed with HUD in August, 1974.

The story will be continued.
Architect Louis I. Kahn's conception of FOR Memorial Park at island's southern tip (below).

Seven landmark buildings will be restored. Renovation of Blackwell House was completed in 1974 (above right).

Work began on the Chapel of the Good Shepherd (below right).

The development of Roosevelt Island has required the cooperation of diverse government agencies in Washington, Albany, and New York City.

Federal Government
Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Army Corps of Engineers
Coast Guard
Department of Health, Education and Welfare
Department of Housing and Urban Development, Federal Housing Administration Area Office (Minimum Property Standards)
Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of New Communities
Department of Transportation
Federal Aviation Agency
Postal Service

New York City
Board of Education
Board of Estimate, Bureau of Franchises
Borough President's Office (Manhattan and Queens)
Bureau of Gas and Electricity
Bureau of the Budget
Bureau of Water Register
Bureau of Water Resources
Bureau of Waterway Bridges
City Planning Commission
Corporation Counsel
Department of Air Resources
Department of Highways
Department of Marine and Aviation
Department of Parks and Terminals
Department of Real Estate
Department of Sanitation
Department of Traffic
Environmental Protection Administration
Fire Department, Division of Fire Prevention
Health and Hospitals Corporation
Housing and Development Administration
Human Resources Administration
Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transit
Mayor's Office of the Handicapped
Office of the Aging
Office of the Mayor
Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Administration
Police Department
Transit Authority
Transportation Administration