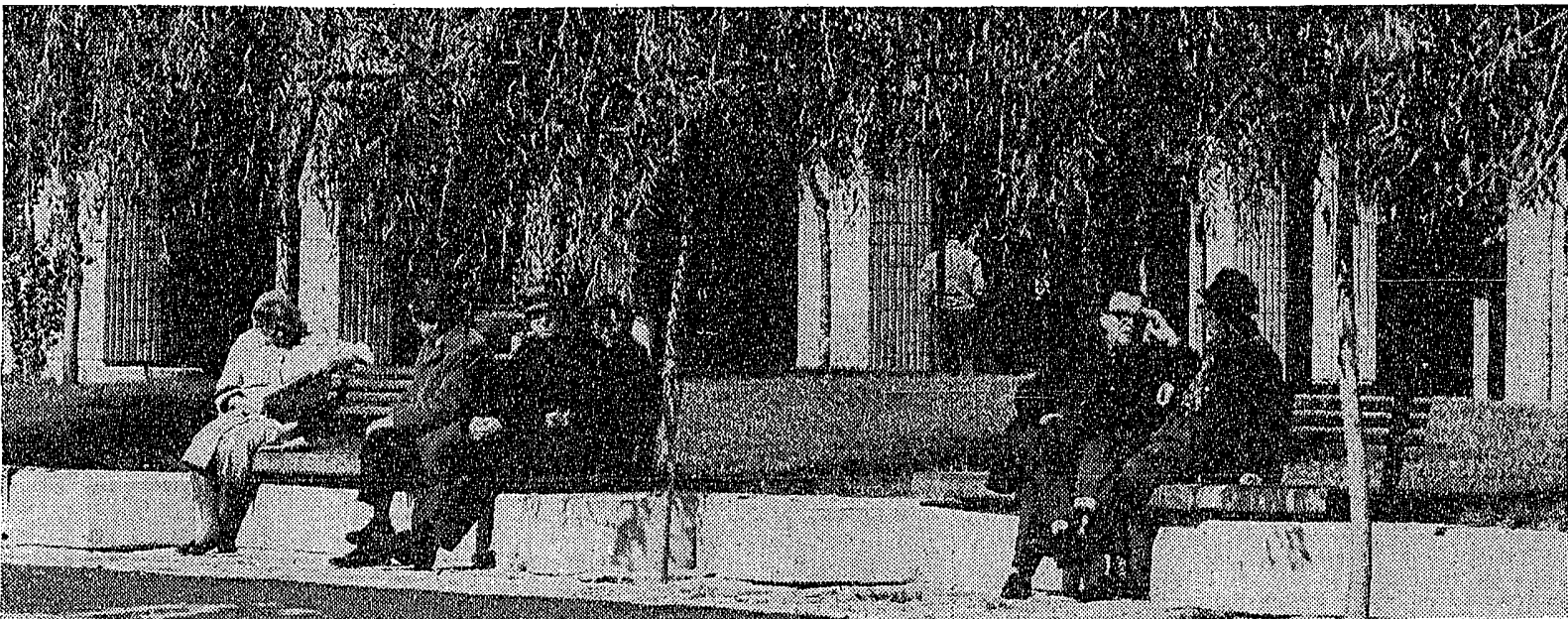


Co-op City's Grounds: After 3 Years, a Success



Willow branches hang over benches at Co-op City, middle-income housing cooperative in the Bronx. Zion and Breen Associates designed landscape.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The motorist speeding by Co-op City on the Hutchinson River Parkway in the Bronx sees only its looming apartment towers. The visitor finds a world of its own, set among 22,400 trees. The vast middle-income housing cooperative built by the United Housing Foundation, a non-

profit trade union federation, opened three years ago to critical notices about its lack of design distinction.

Today, it has one of the most successful landscaping jobs that ever turned a lemon into lemonade.

No other housing project in New York can make this statement. There is nothing comparable in scale or standard of design. The city's public housing site plans and grounds have been stamped out of the same bleak, unimaginative mold for years, and middle-income housing has faced such rapidly rising costs that landscaping is a luxury.

Salt-Sand Base.
The green world at Co-op City is no mean achievement because its base is flat, hydraulic fill—300 acres of salt sand. It started as a desolate limbo. There is only one original tree still on the site.

Now, \$5.4-million later there are 177 landscaped acres (the rest is building) by the New York firm of Zion and Breen Associates. These are the landscape architects who gave you Mr. Paley's small, exquisitely sophisticated park on 52d Street.

At the base of Co-op City's towers they have created a gently rolling terrain. Wet sand was pumped in for low hills that hide the traffic beyond the development's car-free superblocks.

The fill is covered with topsoil and sod, and the grass is embellished with masses of willows, Lombardy poplars, London plane trees and Japanese black pines that had to be gotten from California when local supplies ran out.

Wooden-Block Borders
There are sand gardens with pine islands surrounded by borders of wooden blocks that are cheaper and prettier than concrete. "We had all that sand and it saved money," says Robert Zion.

Groups of poplars screen garages, and willows fill awkward spots between buildings. A 31-acre open park adjoins the educational park and schools being built by the United Housing Foundation, which will be turned back to the city on completion.

A two-story shopping center surrounds a paved court with three ivy and willow islands. A fourth island is a hillock covered with artificial grass of the kind used in stadiums, meant here for children to play on while parents shop. It is worn bald with constant, passionate use.

The same imitation grass appears in other hard-use play areas. It sounds dreadful, but looks fine because there is so much of the real thing around it.

Informal Play Layout

There are no formal playgrounds. Well-selected equipment including teepees, climbing devices and simple wooden forms, are scattered through the sand gardens and across the lawns, often as an effective kind of sculpture. Handsome natural rock outcroppings are also utilized.

Paving is of London block, a prefabricated stone that can be easily replaced in sections, and flat cobbles. It borders the apartment houses, where trees will grow to form canopies overhead.

Group of townhouses are given a more unified, urban setting with "wall to wall" London block inset with ivy beds and willows. A contractor had to be set up with special machinery to make the block, which is commonly used in England and Scandinavia.

Nothing like it is commonly, or uncommonly, used here. Attractive, patterned paving shown in architects' housing drawings is always the first casualty of costs. Asphalt walks and parking

lots shatter planners' dreams and designs.

The only blacktop at Co-op City was put in at the very start, and was rejected immediately by the landscape architects and the client. As the job went on and rapport increased with the designers, U.H.F. became increasingly open-handed.

At one point, small trees were removed and larger ones substituted at the client's request. The \$5½-million has been spent on land-fill, planting, drainage, pavement, lights and street furniture. All are of exemplary standard.

There is some argument about whether U.H.F. hired Zion and Breen as landscape architects and site planners

under their own steam or under pressure by the city's planners. But the result is a successful demonstration of how to humanize housing that many people thought was beyond help.

The huge buildings were raised to permit passage and views through at the ground. Everything has been done to soften the project's gigantism at eye level, where it counts.

Curiously, Co-op City residents have had to unlearn their inhibitions about using the land. Many were graduates of other U.H.F. projects, conditioned by standardized chain-link fence and keep-off-the-grass formulas.

Early "grievances" included the fact that there were benches on the grass. The

designers' emphasis on variety to relieve the scale and sameness of the structures led to squabbles about "equality" of treatment.

Today, Co-op City is neither the purgatory nor the heaven that its critics and champions predicted. It is a functioning community. Only New York—a city of 8 million snobs, skeptics and desperate survivors—could have swallowed a new town of this size within its limits without a ripple. Anywhere else in the world, there would be a steady stream of visitors to see how a community of 45,000-going-on-60,000 takes shape.

Co-op City has none of the chic new-town esthetics or life-style cachet of a Res-

ton, Va. It will never be in the fashionable planning spotlight like the new town on Welfare Island being built by the New York State Urban Development Corporation. Zion and Breen are also the landscape architects for Welfare Island, where they are already running into the asphalt-paving syndrome.

But it has 15,372 well-planned apartments that are no mean achievement in New York's stumbling housing numbers game.

And there is now a younger, more sophisticated management at U.H.F. that is going far beyond the foundation's sterile patterns of the past. In the next project, it may be possible to raise your eyes from the ground.



Sand gardens with pine islands surrounded by wooden blocks are cheaper than concrete



There are no playgrounds, but teepees, climbing devices and simple wooden forms are scattered throughout the sand gardens and across the lawns, often as a kind of sculpture. Natural rock outcroppings are also utilized in the area.