

Quality Design With Amenities

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Just one year after the master plan for Welfare Island was unveiled with some political fanfare at the Metropolitan Museum, the design development of the first stage of the plan is being presented at the same institution, suitably in advance of Election Day. It is the showpiece and

star performance of the New York State Urban Development Corporation, which was

created by the State Legislature to expedite housing and urban renewal. As such, it can't do Governor Rockefeller any harm. But this is more than a political event; it is a planning event of the first magnitude.

Here is the 1970 American dream, urban division, by a stellar lineup of designers that reads like a selection from an architectural Who's Who. Edward J. Logue, head of the corporation and former director of urban renewal for Boston and New Haven, specializes in a blend of architectural and political showmanship. Moreover, he has a formidable reputation for getting things built.

The master plan by Philip Johnson and John Burgee combines parks (for the advocates of open space) and a new town for an eventual 20,000 people (for the city's critical housing needs) in a mix of high-, low-, and middle-income units.

Harmony in Environment

Mr. Johnson, long an arbiter of high-income taste, is a late-blooming urbanist of notable sensibilities. The plan creates a genuine urban environment in which the two elements consistently left out by the routine commercial developer are conspicuously present: the amenities and quality of living, through design.

This skeleton has now been fleshed out by 10 outstanding New York and Boston architects. They are Giorgio Cavaglieri, landmark restoration; Gruzen and Partners, systems analysis; Kallmann & McKinnell, a town garage and public service building; and Johnson and Burgee, the town center. The firms of Conklin and Rosant; John M. Johansen, Mitchell, Giurgola and Johnson and Burgee have designed 3,000 units of low-, middle- and high-income housing for 12,000 people in the first stage of construction.

Two firms of landscape architects, Dan Kiley and Partners and Zion and Breen, are studying the parks, streets and promenades. An engineering firm, Gibbs and Hill, is charged with the infrastructure of island services and transportation.

Mr. Logue is known for that model of urban renewal, the Boston Government Center. His formula there—divide and conquer—is being repeated for Welfare Island. Boston's master plan, by I. M. Pei, was parceled out to architects who produced a full spectrum of humdrum to superior structures including Kallmann & McKinnell's prize-winning City Hall.

To this observer, any danger of chaos by coalition on Welfare Island is offset by the kind of diversity that will prevent a "project" look. This is particularly true today when the biggest miracle a cost-conscious housing architect can produce is a creative juggling act of stock windows and brick walls.

Powers That Help

There is considerable irony in the fact that when the best men are finally getting involved in the urban environment, the ludicrous cost of construction is making it close to impossible to build anything at all.

But Mr. Logue and Governor Rockefeller are determined to build, and they have several things going for them. The Urban Development Corporation has \$1-billion in bond-selling power, of which it is prepared to invest a substantial amount in the roads, public and commercial facilities and services of Welfare Island. That is important, because no hard-pressed city can supply the funds needed today for the essential, supporting basis of community development.

It also has the highly controversial power to override local codes and regulations, and its projects are not subject to local review. In New York, political pressures for low-income housing now wreck planning proposals regardless of their merit.

With the first stage of design, some problems have become very clear. The cost of the parks and open space will be enormous and hard to meet. The island's main street, with the greatest concentration of the tallest buildings, a winter-shadowed

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mall. The architects find that they must work together to identify common elements that can be standardized for cost reduction.

The Welfare Island Development Corporation, with Adam Yarmolinsky as its head, is ready to proceed. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the parent corporation has the magic to lure any of the large New York builders to the island's projects.

The architects see Welfare Island as a chance to put into practice their vision of a better world on a splendid and highly visible site. They have already invested more time and effort than their con-

tracts can pay for. But New York builders are puzzled and unmoved by a vision of a better world. It doesn't have the optimum cash flow.

The future of the plan, therefore, depends on such nonesthetic elements as interest rates, whether the highly profitable market for commercial construction in New York softens, and the persuasive powers of the state.

Under the terms of Urban Development Corporation's lease with the city, construction must begin by June, 1971. New Yorkers might try prayer, facing banks. In the meantime, they can see the promised land at the Metropolitan until Oct. 21.