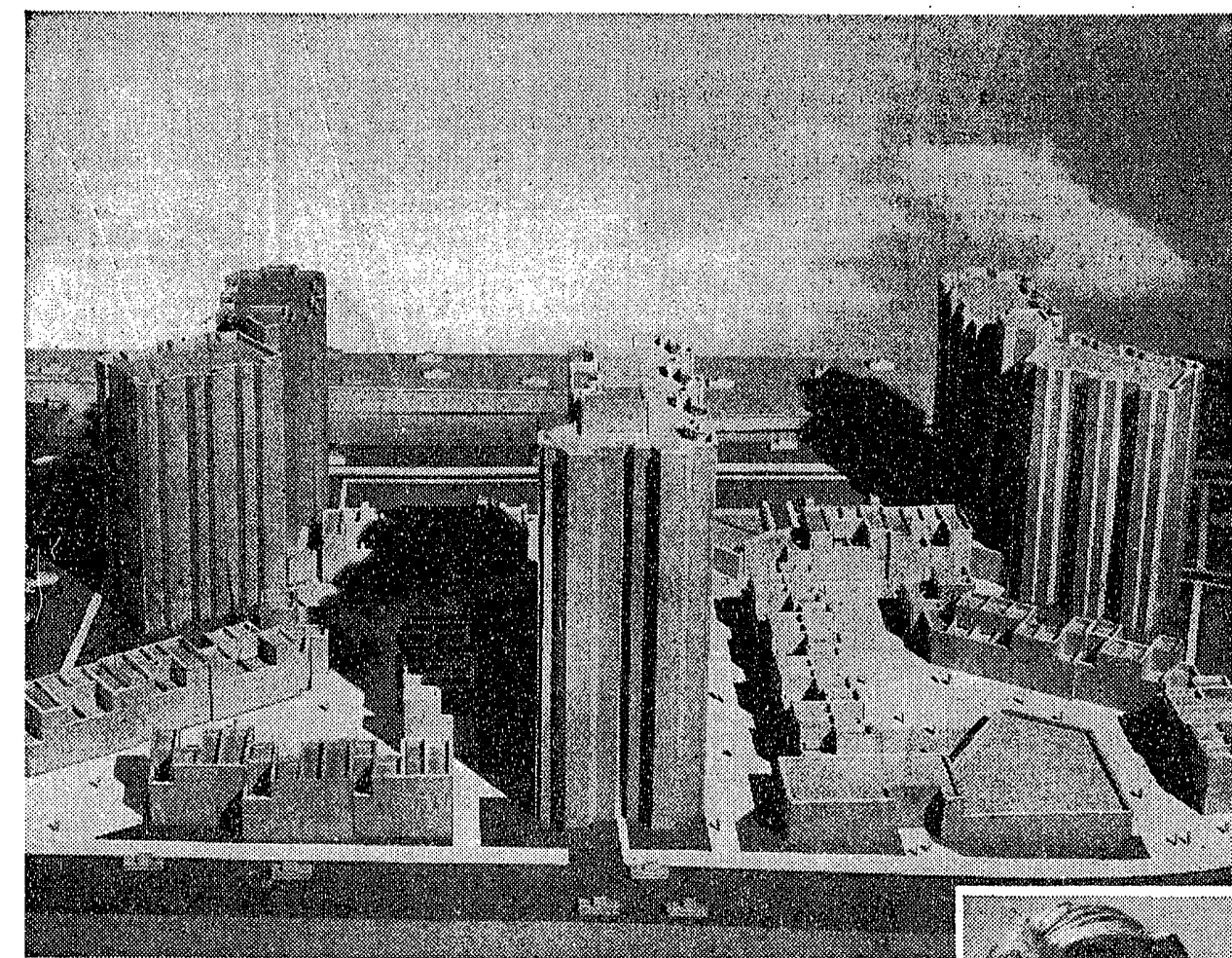


Forest Hills: Innovation vs. Red Tape: Forest Hills: Innovation vs. Red Tape

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 8, 1972; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times

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The original design for the Forest Hills scatter-site housing project, above, was done by firm headed by Ulrich Franzen, right. It envisioned a variety of housing and low buildings connected by a pedestrian street that would have joined the various areas.



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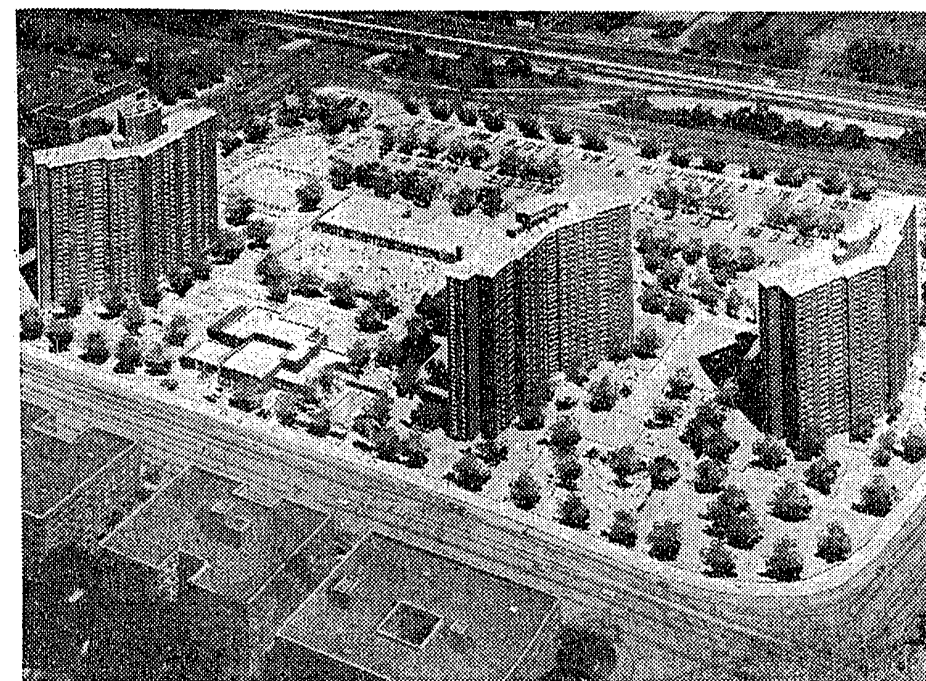
The original design for the controversial Forest Hills scatter-site housing project embraced a new approach to racial and economic integration through an emphasis on more sensitive neighborhood planning.

It was abandoned because of rapidly rising construction costs, a change in policy among the city's housing agencies away from progressive design and back to "cookie cutter" formulas, and what observers call an intractable city housing bureaucracy.

The current design of the Forest Hills project is what some urban experts call a case history in failure. The first plan, by one of the country's leading architectural firms, Ulrich Franzen and Associates, was an innovative, environmentally conscious plan. Mr. Franzen was discharged by the Housing Authority and never paid.

The present plan, by the office of Samuel Paul, a New York architect who has worked on other Housing Authority projects, is a standard Housing Authority product of large towers in open space.

What began as a socially oriented, environmentally varied housing design became



Current project plan, by Samuel Paul, for area bounded by 62d Drive, bottom, 108th Street, left, Long Island Expressway service road, top, and Colonial Avenue, right.

the three monumental, 23-story buildings and their institutionalized services against which a large part of the neighborhood's protest has been directed.

Whether the better plan

would have affected neighborhood attitudes is questionable, but design professionals believe the chance of success is far less likely now.

Mr. Franzen was hired by the Housing Authority for the Forest Hills job as part of a drive to elevate housing design standards in the early days of the scatter-site program.

3-Part Presentation

The architect's initial presentation, made in May, 1968, consisted of three parts: a photographic documentation of the nature of the site, an analysis of the established middle-income community around it, and a plan.

Recognizing the size and impact of the project, he noted that the basis of his proposal was a design "socially oriented toward the needs of a new community." He warned the authority that the surrounding community was "hostile to the project and saw it as a threat."

His plan consisted of apartments and community facilities in rows of two-story structures clustered to form a pedestrian street running through the site, connected to three 17-story apartment towers and one 23-story tower for the elderly.

Human Scale Sought

The variety of housing and the low buildings were meant to minimize the impact of the high density that was required, and to relate the towers to a more human scale.

The street was to create a neighborhood character and functions by visually and physically linking a small commercial facility, community centers, a nursery school and recreation areas for the elderly.

There were to be such things as a play area next to a laundry, where mothers could leave their children,

and an all-night drugstore-soda fountain. Recreation areas for teen-agers and adults were to be in active, commercial spaces. The mix of activities and interests, said the architect, was "essential to urban community life."

The Housing Authority's design chief, Max Schreiber, called it a good concept. He said that it would have to be reviewed by the board of directors because it was a departure from Housing Authority design policy. He also expressed concern about the expense of complex foundation work on a site known to have poor conditions.

Mr. Franzen next presented his proposal as part of a formal, first-phase report in January, 1969. The design was supported by a foundation-engineering feasibility study.

No Small-Scale Buildings

The report stated that the plan was "purposefully in opposition to the usual complete segregation of spaces and activities."

What the Housing Authority is putting up now in Forest Hills at 108th Street and 62d Drive is the complete segregation of spaces and activities.

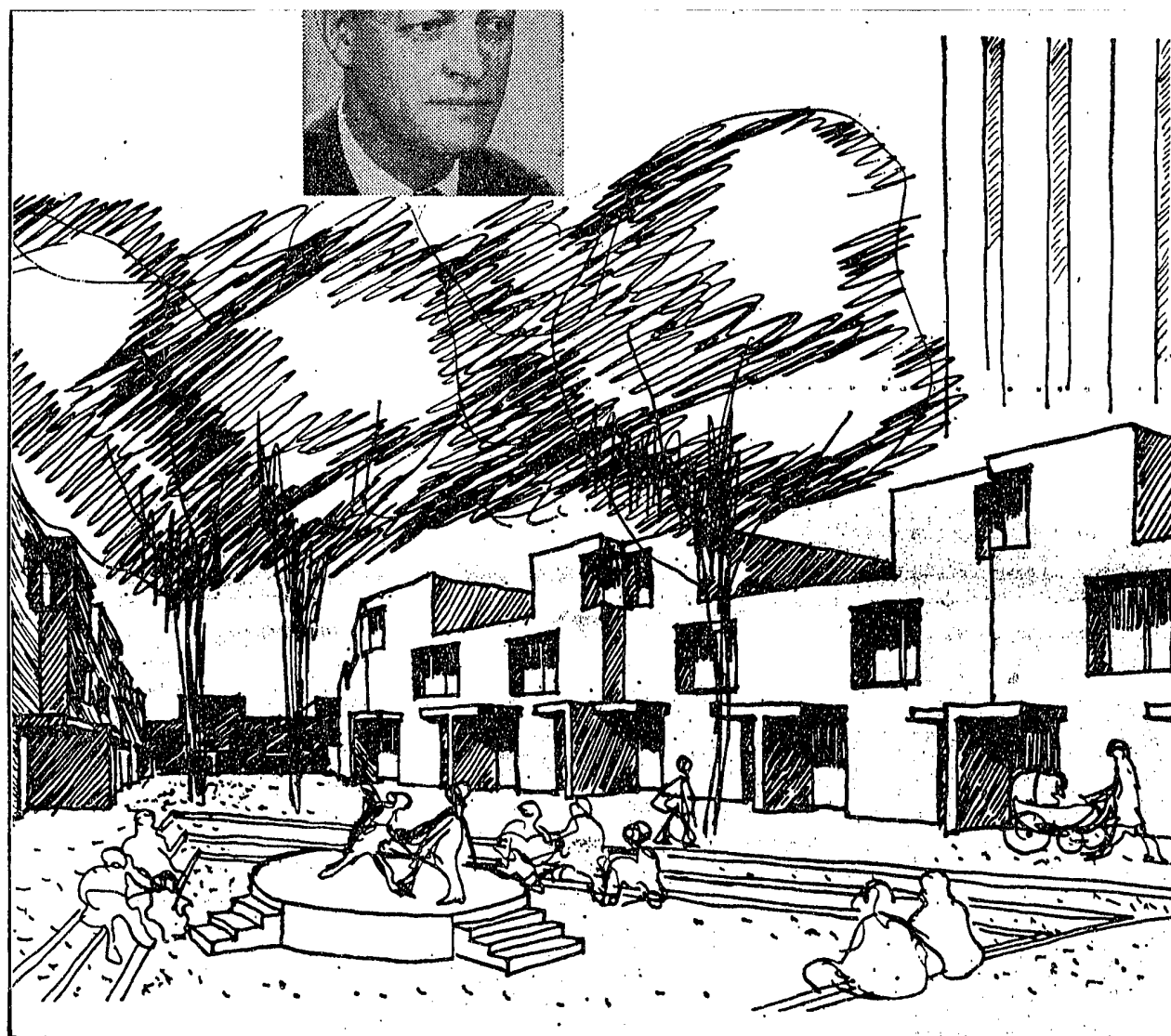
The three towers, for which site preparation has begun, are long and bulky as well as high, with a bend to make them appear less massive. There will be no small-scale buildings at all.

There is one free-standing structure planned for an early-childhood center and another for a community center. The rest of the site is divided between parking and open space.

Mr. Paul maintains that his design is compatible with the neighborhood.

He has explained to the

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The street was planned to create a neighborhood character and function by establishing a physical and visual link

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Housing Authority that although the surrounding buildings are six and 15 stories high—with the bulk of them bordering the site almost uniformly six stories—"we concluded that there is no design criteria for maintaining these same heights" and that the difference "would create an interesting diversification." He points to a trend to taller residential buildings in the Rego Park area of Queens and in Boston and Chicago.

Labels, Not Functional Sites

Between the buildings on his plan there are indications of places to sit or play that seem to be labels rather than integral features.

The Housing Authority says that Mr. Franzen was let go because his design was hopelessly over the budget. "It was economics completely," Mr. Schreiber says.

Mr. Franzen says that he was never given a figure but was told to design within the Federal statutory limits on the cost per apartment, which he did.

In the minutes of a January, 1969, Housing Authority meeting, Mr. Franzen was told that he was almost \$3-million over a \$10,284,750 development project figure of January, 1967. He said that this was the first he had heard of the figure, that he was working within statutory limits, as instructed, and that much of the escalation resulted from rising costs.

A Housing Authority spokesman told Mr. Franzen that the full amount of the statutory limit was not available. The architect stated that he had not been told this before. He estimated the cost of his plan at \$13-million.

Cost Now \$29.98-Million

In a later version of the history of the project put out by the Housing Authority, the same January, 1967, development cost budget is listed as \$17,155,000. Four years later the estimated cost was \$26,050,000. The total cost, including land, of the Forest Hills project today is \$29,980,000, the authority says.

Because the authority allowed generously for further construction cost rises, the figure is actually \$2-million under the present statutory limit.

When questioned recently, Donald H. Elliott, chairman of the City Planning Commission, said that redesign of any part of the project would push costs over the Federal guidelines. He was not aware that the project was \$2-million under the prescribed limit.

The Planning Commission has reviewed and approved the plan. "Design was mentioned," Mr. Elliott says, "but it was never an issue."

The definition of scatter-site housing endorsed by the city is a project outside the

slum areas that is small enough to be assimilated by a surrounding, stable community. It must provide adequate support facilities such as schools and transportation.

Although it is in a stable, middle-income community and requires no relocation, the 840 apartments of the Forest Hills development are more than twice the average number and five times as projects.

Its buildings, on eight and a half acres, are massive and will dominate the neighborhood. Their assimilation is questionable. This is, in fact, a major housing project under the scatter-site label.

A survey of the scatter-site program in general indicates that the principal of small scale and innovative design that were an essential component in the realization of its objectives of racial and economic integration have been scuttled.

Several factors are responsible for the retreat. The most important is the meteoric rise of construction costs since the program's inception in 1966. These costs, often padded by contractors because of delays and difficulties in dealing with the city, have gone up from 1 to 2 per cent a month.

This has made small-scale, humanized design increasingly expensive, often pushing the price for amenity over the Federal guidelines. To stay within these limits it has been necessary to raise the number of units in each project, making small projects large.

Because it is easier and often cheaper, the toll in regressive design, or retreaded clichés, has been high.

The pressing political need to step up a lagging housing production record has led to changes of agency policy and personnel. The trend has been back to familiar solutions that require minimum processing, have no innovative risks and provide easier cost calculations and a familiar product for the builder.

Those who work with the housing agencies find them either unequipped or unwilling to deal with new designs or ideas. They charac-

terize the Housing and Development Administration as chaotic, and the Housing Authority as regimentally efficient according to set rules and formulas.

These factors have apparently reinforced each other to the point where no political leverage from the top—where calls for quality were continually being released by the Mayor's office and the City Planning Commission—could keep the design program from being subverted.

Architects hired by the Housing Authority follow a prescribed pattern. They are given the site, the project requirements, the budget and Federal and city limitations.

These include Federal cost limits, zoning and building codes, and a 300-page book listing everything from room sizes, corridor widths and stairway placement to kitchen and bath equipment.

It is quite possible to design strictly by the book and many architects do. To deviate in the interest of better solutions makes problems.

Cut Off From Community

Mr. Franzen alleges that he was not allowed to deal with the Forest Hills community, although he felt that no design could succeed without an exchange of information and confidence. He was permitted one meeting with the social-services unit of the Housing Authority.

"We represented a new awareness," Mr. Franzen says. "We saw the project as a demonstration of the right way to do it."

"They are not evil people at the Housing Authority," he says. "They are just good but insensitive soldiers. They are dealing in a clean, sanitary way of storing the poor."