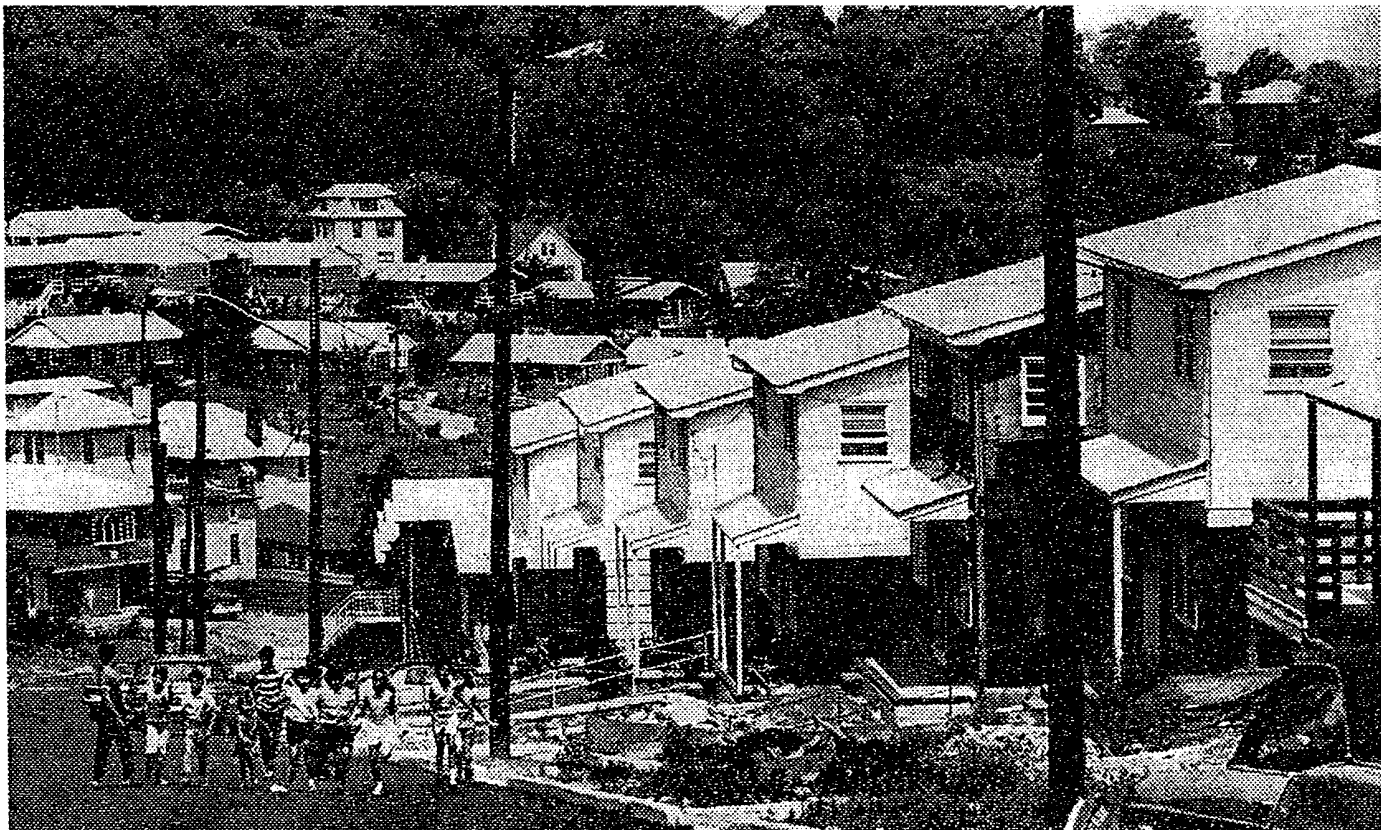


Staten Island's Beauty Losing to Builders: Dreams of Making Staten ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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Staten Island's Beauty Losing to Builders



Rows of small houses on minimum-size lots characterize one of the many new developments rising on Staten Island

The New York Times (by Edward Hausner)

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Nine months after the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to Staten Island opened with the promise of a last chance for a new, improved suburbia in the greater metropolitan area, the dreams of beauty and better living are mired in mud.

The mud has been created by bulldozers ruthlessly leveling wooded hills, rolling sites and unspoiled farmland for what critics call some of the most inadequately designed and planned housing in the country.

These houses are going up

on land that has quintupled in value since the laying of the cornerstone of the bridge in 1959 in a speculative real estate boom paralleled only by the Florida boom of the nineteen-twenties.

The critics protest that the houses are ugly and expensive—\$22,000 to \$30,000 for the most ordinary, minimum builders' models on scant 40-by-100-foot lots—and that they are being scattered throughout Staten Island's 13,000 acres of open, undeveloped land with a haphazard abandon that could not be better calculated to destroy

the countryside if it had been planned by enemy action.

Any planning of the still rural one-third of the island, according to Richmond Borough President Albert V. Maniscalco, is being done "through the back door."

This back-door policy consists primarily of a defensive battle to hold token parcels of city land for future community use, and, at the same time, to pursue an uncompromising policy of selling vast amounts of other city-owned property.

Back-door planning has

been reduced to the delaying device of keeping street and drainage maps of newly surveyed land on the shelves of the City Planning Commission, since the city will not sell the land before the maps are officially reviewed and released.

Although this delay actually results from a lack of personnel in the Planning Department, few deplore the slight brake it applies to uncontrolled speculation.

Back-door planning also means the indirect acquisition

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Dreams of Making Staten Island a Beautiful Suburb Fading in Building Boom

LACK OF PLANNING MARKS PROJECTS

City and Speculators Selling Land to Developers—New Houses Assailed as Ugly

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of parks by the inclusion of fringe areas as part of the purchase of interstate highway rights of way, rather than designing the parks as integral parts of growing communities.

These parks are unrelated to any better housing plans that could be made possible through total land planning.

Back-door planning relies on a single inadequate tool—the zoning law—to control the tide of jerry-built, rubber-stamp row houses that are springing up in the sylvan wilderness like August weeds. Regulation by zoning is limited to the enlargement of lots and reduction of densities and does nothing to promote the creative design of planned new communities.

No Master Plan

All this is piecemeal, catch-as-catch-can control, comparable to fighting a forest fire with an eyedropper. There is no master plan for Staten Island, a 60-square-mile area three times the size of Manhattan Island, containing nearly one-fifth of the city's total land.

Before the bridge was built, this miraculously rural borough within eyesight of Manhattan's towers had only 3 per cent of the city's total population; since then, its population has grown by 75,000 to 250,000. It is predicted that this figure will double by 1975.

During the nineteen-thirties and forties, about one third of Staten Island was city-owned, most of this having been taken over for nonpayment of taxes when the speculation land bubble burst in the late nineteen-twenties. The city's holdings are now being broken up as fast and as profitably as the Department of Real Estate can get them on the auction block.

Land Sales Increase

This is in marked contrast to the practice of European cities, notably those in Scandinavia, where municipal governments have bought and held large tracts of neighboring land for future expansion and successful new community development.

The 1959 start of the bridge brought no holds of the city's extraordinary resources future planned development. The gleam in speculators' eyes was turned into profits in the city's pocket. In the speculation boom, the city has been the biggest seller.

Ten million dollars' worth of land went in 1960; \$9 million in 1961; an average of \$5 million plus in 1962 and 1963. With the completion of the bridge in 1964 there was a sharp upswing—more than \$7 million worth of land was sold in 1965 and \$5 million in the first six months in 1965.

A pressured Budget Director, forced to seek a specific income



STRIPPED: Once wooded hillside is gouged by bulldozers preparatory to the quick development of new home colony

to balance the budget each year, does not weigh money in hand against a vision of the city's long-term needs.

Only the 1,080-acre Annadale Huguenot tract extending southwest of the center of the island to the south shore is being planned as a coordinated unit. This will be carried out under the open-space provisions of urban renewal.

The site was selected to correct the crass misuse of land involved in early city mapping of the area, which ran a Manhattan-type of gridiron through ponds and woods for the regiments of standard speculator lots.

But a protracted conflict during which irate, politically conservative residents, backed by Borough President Maniscalco and joined by Mayor Wagner, demanded retraction of the urban renewal designation, led to a two-year delay before the renewal designation was confirmed and planning even started.

Too Late for a Pattern

Nothing will show, even on paper, for at least another year.

All possibility of building a model community soon enough for it to have any salutary influence as a pattern for private builders has faded. But to the local residents, the menacing image of Federally assisted urban renewal as a "big-brother" bulldozer is a continuing fear.

Ironically, the bulldozer is there anyway, without the advantage of planning. Even the Annadale-Huguenot area is scarred by pockets of private, speculative mutilation. The rest of the countryside—a revelation of pastoral loveliness to most New Yorkers who have limited themselves to a few childhood trips on the Staten Island ferry—is defaced by builder's dusty, earth-strewn plots along every highway and many country roads.

Trees and telephone poles bear repeated messages of land for sale and model houses to be seen. A billboard in a field of Queen Anne's lace announces a new project, "Coming Soon. Watch for Us," and in the jargon of bastard suburban architecture everywhere, promises



UNTOUCHED: The original pastoral quality of the landscape is still found on the island

"distinctively styled split levels and hi-ranches."

One housing project proclaims its "third section, coming soon," against a background of flattened, bull-dozed desolation, opposite a sleepy, shaded 19th-century Greek Revival church and graveyard.

A drive through farmland reveals offerings of 120 and 150 acres for sale for home sites. Korvette City stands next to a farmer's market. But more often there are the single-block, dozen-house, quick-buck projects of the small, short-term operator whose costs and prices are high, whose standards are low and whose product has a scattered, erosive, small-shot destructiveness that defaces every stretch of unspoiled land.

Just south of the bridge approaches, hills comparable to the outlying San Francisco country have been stripped

bare, and treeless houses march unfeelingly across them in straight, bulldozed rows. There is no suggestion of the contour planning that professionals consider appropriate to this topography.

Grace Period a Factor

Many of these spot developments are a result of the city's two-year grace period in implementing the new zoning code of 1961. Not only did this period allow speculative investors to file enough old-zoning-law blockbusters to glut Manhattan for another generation, but it also permitted Staten Island developers to file and build minimal housing on minimum lots outlawed by the new legislation.

Many of the worst products appearing now are still the residue of that rush to file.

All that restrains the Staten

Island speculator today is that much of the island is still being officially mapped. Building permits can be obtained by private landowners at any time, but certificates of occupancy are not available until mapping is completed and approved.

The maps are made by the Richmond Borough President's office and reviewed and released by the City Planning Commission. The Department of Real Estate sells city land only after mapping, when no unknown factors depress the price. Pressures from builders, land speculators and the city for the release of those maps is persistent.

Borough President Maniscalco, a round, doughty, optimistic man with a voice of political-rally intensity, who has run the island for 11 years, is fighting these pressures.

He has withheld some city-



UNPLANNED: Packed together, the houses are ranked without any thought of contour



BOOM: Signs typify the rush to take advantage of the land boom to build more houses

owned land for school sites, parks and recreation and must justify these holds to the Bureau of the Budget every six months.

His major effort to curb the destruction of the island's natural assets with the help of other city departments, has been the creation of a so-called green belt on a north-south axis down the center of the island, across its most handsome hills and woods.

This belt ties together parkland and houses. It includes the 56-acre campsite sold by the Girl Scouts to a developer for \$1 million and then remapped by the city for a park.

Zoning of privately owned areas has been stepped up to 100-foot frontages for more green and "quality" one-family houses, in Mr. Maniscalco's words. Buffer 60-foot lot zones lead into built up areas and to the potential suburban slums of crowded 40-foot lots.

Sixty-foot frontages are not large, and parts of the green belt will be tightly packed. One-family houses are not the only answer, or even the best answer to suburban growth.

The Staten Island green belt

conspicuously lacks newer and more attractive approaches that planners and architects endorse, such as the combination of cluster housing and community open-land development. The solutions of greens and town housing and towers that European new towns have used so well are not in the picture for Staten Island.

Transit Service Rescued

Nor has there been any official long-range general transportation study for the borough. The only transportation planning has been for five new expressways in staged construction now, with emphasis on through-traffic to New Jersey, linked to Brooklyn by the Verrazano Bridge.

Although a bus line crosses the bridge and connects with a Brooklyn subway, there is no provision for rail service.

On the other end, the Staten Island Rapid Transit, privately owned, was close to receivership six years ago but has been given an infusion of a 10-year city subsidy. Buses extend their routes erratically to meet crises of development.

To New Yorkers, the new

bridge is more of an esthetic and engineering marvel than a way to get to Staten Island. Its success in its first nine months of operation has been with the through-traffic for which it was planned.

Direct transportation to Manhattan is still on the famous 5-cent ferries, which carry 75,000 passengers a day on one of the most spectacular commutation rides in the world.

The chief effect of the bridge, in terms of urban expansion, is to open Staten Island to Brooklyn as a bedroom borough. The first new wave of Staten Island residents were Brooklynites displaced by the Bay Ridge approaches to the bridge.

Population trends and building activity prove that the predicted invasion is on.

This is New York's last suburban frontier. The question for city planners is whether there is still time for orderly growth, or whether Staten Island will become another Long Island, with its eroded landscape, destructive suburban sprawl and spectacularly missed opportunities.