

Architecture

How Doth Welfare Island Fare?

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

CAVEATS continued.
Last week it was the building program of the Metropolitan Museum.

This week, Welfare Island and Battery Park City.

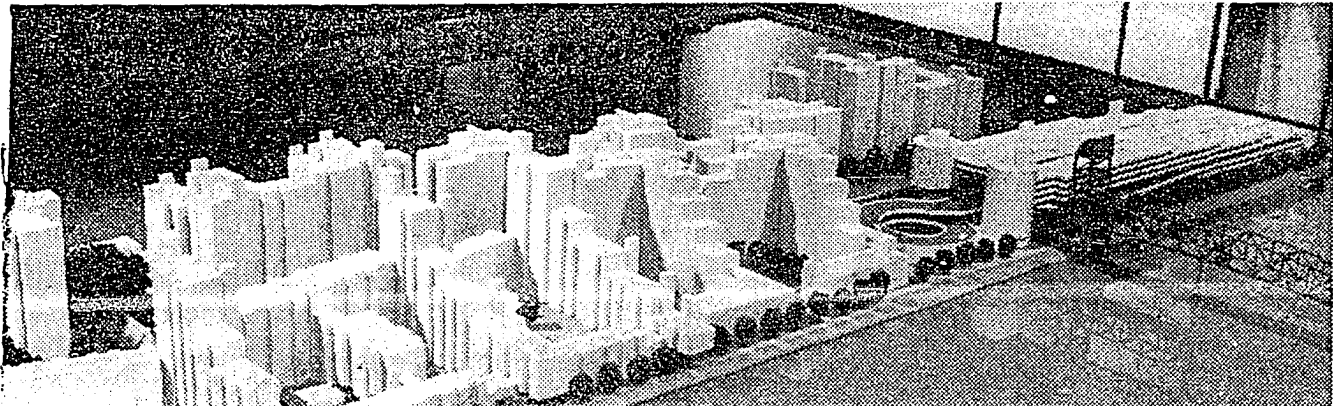
Welfare Island is a prime piece of undeveloped land adjacent to the heart of New York, almost spotlighted as a showcase for thoughtful urban design. Battery Park City offers an equally comprehensive chance for vast amounts of ordered new building on 91 acres of landfill to be created at the East River edge of the burgeoning revival of Lower Manhattan.

To say that these two projects represent an enormously important opportunity for New York is to severely understate the case. It is frightening even to think about them, because they represent so much to be gained or lost. The potential for planned functional development, including badly needed housing, and genuine urban drama is staggering.

To muffle these opportunities could be New York's tragic destiny. There is a kind of Valkyrian predestination in this city that grinds dreams down to failure. The predictable agents of destruction are political and economic, but the kill is usually human, through cumulative small disasters that either stop the dream cold or reduce it to unrecognizable pedestrianism. That is the New York style of doing things.

And so the caveats are in order. Some questions must be asked, and some trends questioned. It is critical that these two major 20th-century undertakings get built — and dream of dreams — that they be built right.

On a realistic and professional level, people are working hard for those dreams. Both projects have been kicked off by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and state law, Battery Park City as an independent undertaking, Welfare Island as part of the program of the New York State Urban Development Corporation. Edward J. Logue, a tested urban maker and shaker, runs Welfare Island's parent Urban Development Corporation, and Charles J. Urstadt heads the Battery Park City Development Corporation. These are not paper plans.



Model of the first stage of the Welfare Island plan, a new town for 12,000 people
Putting together a distinguished jigsaw puzzle

Both projects have had the benefit of master plans by some of New York's best architects. Battery Park City has steered the steeper shoals of Rockefeller-Lindsay conflict and two phases of design. The final version is by Wallace Harrison, Conklin and Rossant, and Philip Johnson and John Burgee.

The master plan for Welfare Island is the work of Philip Johnson and John Burgee. It has been parceled out for design development to Johnson-Burgee and six leading New York and Boston architects. The others are Conklin and Rossant, John M. Johansen, Kallmann and McKinnell, Mitchell-Guigola Associates, and Sert, Jackson and Associates. In addition, there are two firms of landscape architects, Dan Kiley and Zion and Breen, Gruzen and Partners for "systems analysis," Giorgio Cavaglieri for landmark preservation, and Gibbs and Hill, engineers.

Politics being what they are, this distinguished jigsaw puzzle was exhibited somewhat prematurely last month in time for the gubernatorial election. What it showed was a hasty pudding. On the positive side, there was the promise of a variety of approaches to combat what might be the unavoidable uniformity of a single hand. On the negative side, one of the plan's most felicitous features, the side views through to the water from the central, north-south main street, were lost, with the street turned into an almost solid wall of the highest buildings.

Each architect, and they are good ones, is conspicuously doing this own thing.

At the same time, most make paradoxical references to standardized, industrialized building. One office, Conklin and Rossant, has come up with a fully developed industrialized building system. So far, no suggested system relates to any of the others in the purely practical matters of construction technology and economics. These practical matters of structure and cost will ultimately determine whether any of this is built at all, the urbanistic esthetic and picturesque planning principles be damned. That's New York.

These matters are to be "worked out." Apparently tied to incomplete, nebulous and conflicting systems, neither the disposition of buildings and their parts nor the plans are always satisfactory.

The only conclusion that one can come to about a design procedure that seems to build in complications and delays is that in his genuine admiration for architects of talent and his zeal for the star system, Ed Logue has tossed a lot of talent into the pot and stirred. That may have worked at other times in other cities. But New York, as has been observed, is a very peculiar place.

First, if you can get anything built at all in New York, it automatically costs too much, and higher costs here go up faster than anywhere else. Second, it is extremely difficult to lure New York developers away from their favorite neighborhoods to new ground. It becomes even more difficult if you present them with half a dozen different artistic tempera-

ments and a motley assortment of deviant designs. Some of the city's biggest builders, who have really wanted to become involved in Welfare Island have already found this a stumbling block.

But the real concern about the way the island is being designed comes down to simple common sense. In the face of the formidable cost and construction obstacles, and a housing shortage, speed and simplicity would seem to be the desirable, primary objectives. It may sound like heresy in this quarter, but it would appear to be a good idea to have a major developer on the design team from the start.

Instead, every architect, with a ritual bow to every other architect, is still doing his own thing. With a kind of reverse logic, the next job is to decide how these designs can be standardized or coordinated. Gruzen and Partners and the Urban Development Corp. will study them to see if industrialized building processes can be applied to any or all of them, and lacking that, will identify "commonalities," such as kitchens, baths, stairs, service equipment or construction methods. This seems like doing things bottom-end-to, or making twice as much work as necessary in terms of time and design. The process would appear, at the least, absurd, and at worst, a threat to seeing the plan ever built.

We predict, sadly, that after the "coordination of commonalities" has taken place, and everyone has accordingly designed everything all over again, the cost estimates will come in too high. That

takes no clairvoyance; they always do. Then everyone will really begin to design. It will be discovered that the quickest and easiest way to get Welfare Island built at a rational cost, with a minimum of labor trouble, and with maximum speed, will be to use conventional building systems, with, maybe, an experimental exception for demonstration value and future application in Urban Development Corp. programs. This may sound like a blow to progress, but it may be the only expeditious answer right now.

The design answer will be found to be more commonality in such things as good, standardized apartments (just give everyone the best possible apartment and he will make his own kind of nest) and more attention to the relationships of views; walks, passageways, waterfront, public and private spaces and those things that create the amenities of environment.

Preoccupation with building styles, per se, in this time of howling economic and housing crises, becomes architectural navel-studying. This does not mean settling for developers' monotony. It means an increased sensitivity to how buildings are used in the land, and how people use the buildings. Small and subtle differences can be significant. Variety of viewpoint has the value of contributing a variety of experiences, and a richer kind of environmental design.

Lots of luck, gentlemen; all together now, full speed backwards.

Next week, a look at what's happening to Battery Park City.