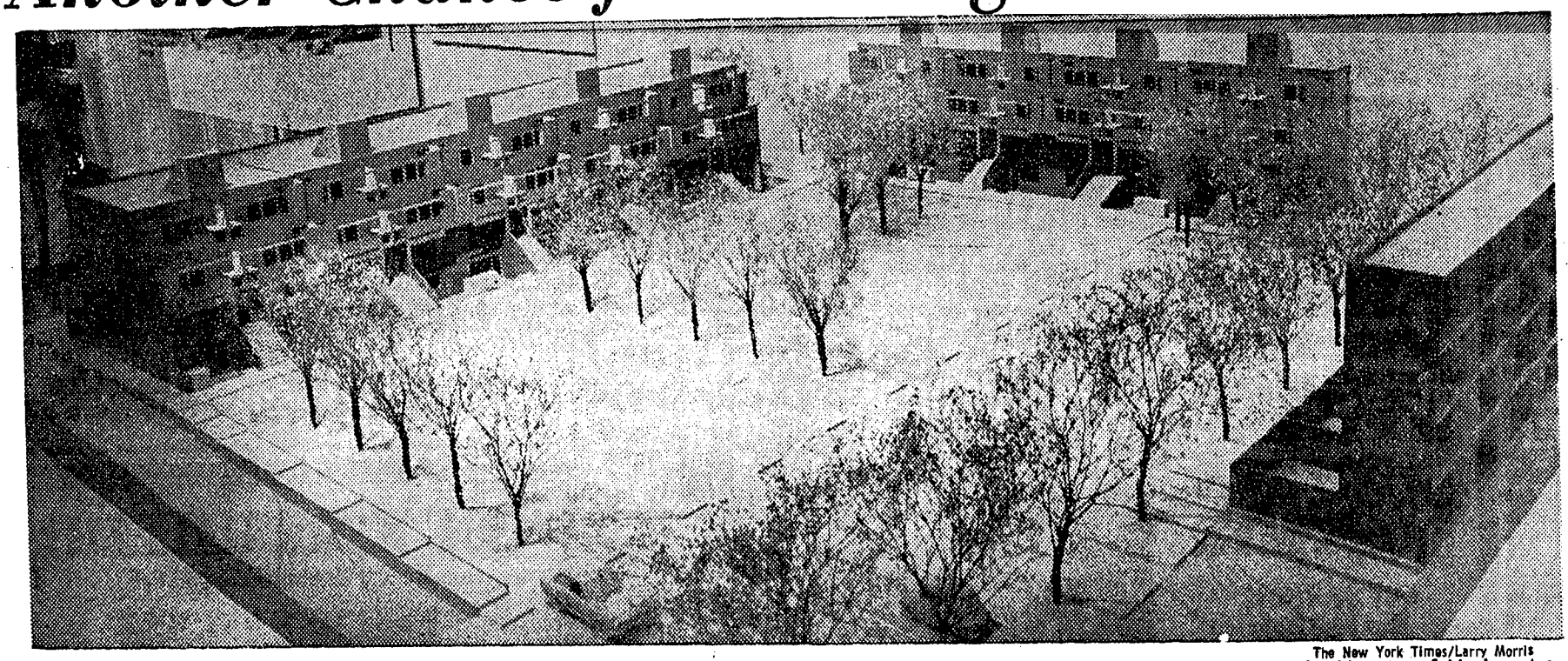
Architecture

Another Chance for Housing



The New York Times/Larry Morris

Model of low-rise apartments for Fox Hills, Staten Island, at the Museum of Modern Art.

"The pendulum swings back. High-rise housing, except for the rich who can afford to supply security and amenities, is out"

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

HISTORY doesn't just repeat itself, it also reverses itself, and you don't have to wait around very long to see it happen. In the 1940's the architectural textbooks celebrated the neat rows of two-to-four story dwellings that had been devised during the previous two decades by the pioneers of modern architecture in Holland and Germany. They were hailed as experiments in the design and sociology of housing.

Visits to the classic examples by J.J.P. Oud in Rotterdam and Ernst May near Frankfurt, roughly 40 years after they were built, found them durable, attractive environments for living, not without—one hesitates to say it—a certain cozy charm. There were antimacassars and ruffled lampshades inside the International Style esthetic, but the anachronism only emphasized the workability of the modest rows of homes relating logically to the street and the family unit, to each other and the setting. Lush gardens reinforced the gemütlichheit.

For contrast, in America, officials have had to blow up parts of St. Louis's Pruitt-Igoe houses: the definitive admission of failure of the high-rise housing dream of the tower in the park, flotsam of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse.

For anyone who had missed the message, the explosion made it clear. The mass billeting of low-income families in impersonal, overscaled, crime-prone, high-rise spaces, divorced from the street, the ground and the community, had proved to be anti-social in the deepest sense.

And so the pendulum swings back. High-rise housing, except for the rich who can afford to supply security and amenity, is out. Low-rise housing is back in. Its virtues have become necessities at a time, ironically, when its economics in terms of land and construction costs have virtually outlawed it in urban areas.

These virtues and necessities are explored, in specific design terms, in an important exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called "Another Chance for Housing: Low Rise Alternatives." Directed by Arthur Drexter, head of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, it consists of models, plans and renderings and will run through

The show is important because it has caught the historical moment of change and fixes it by exhibiting an alternative proposal that could be a catalytic force in today's housing design. It places this project in perspective with a section of historical exposition of low-rise housing experiments. And it ties it to reality with another section on the evolution of housing practices in one of the most powerful government agencies, the New York State Urban Development Corporation, which sponsored the study.

Most important, ground was broken in Brooklyn's Brownsville section by UDC for a version of the project at the same time that the show opened. And the exhibition marks the return of the museum to an activist position in the promotion of what it believes to be the best in design—a leadership role that it carried in objects and furnishings for many years, and is now applying to the much more complex built environment.

The project that is the focus of the show is a carefully studied prototype for low-rise, high-density housing applicable to a range of urban and suburban sites and situations. It is the result of collaborative effort between the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies and the UDC.

The Institute is a private, nonprofit research, educational and development agency with independent funding and policies, allied with the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design. Headed by director Peter Eisenman and chairman Peter Wolf, it acts as a facility for the study of architectural subjects, with emphasis on the public environment. Its role is to form a kind of liaison between abstract problem analysis and realistic application of solutions, drawing at one end on professional and academic resources, and using at the other end the Museum's community connections for practical execution.

The concept of "low-rise alternatives" in housing was developed by the Institute, which then took it to the Urban Development Corporation. Under the direction of Edward J. Logue, UDC had been wrestling with the sociological, esthetic and economic problems of housing design since its creation in 1968. Its dual purpose has been to provide badly needed housing while attempting to develop both social and design sensibility in a public agency product.

It is an open secret that Ed Logue made a personal presentation to the Ford Foundation for further development funding. When the Ford Foundation turned it down, he decided to fund it through his own agency. It was money well spent, and one might say, a Ford Foundation booboo.

The prototype that evolved was developed by Kenneth Frampton and Peter Wolf of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, and Theodore Liebman, Anthony Pangaro and J. Michael Kirkland of UDC. It was put through the hoops of building codes, legal limitations and economic restrictions. "From the very outset," Ed Logue says, "the parties agreed that this was not going to be another theoretical exercise with a planning report and a proposal that would end up gathering dust on a shelf somewhere."

UDC produced two sites: the Brownsville location that is part of the 57-block Marcus Garvey Park Village renewal in Brooklyn, and Fox Hills on Staten Island. Adaptation of the prototype to the Brooklyn site was made by Arthur Baker, Kenneth Frampton and Peter Wolf of the Institute. For Fox Hills, the work was done by Arthur Baker, Peter Eisenman and Peter Wolf. Construction has begun in Brooklyn, with working drawings by David Todd and Associates, for 626 dwelling units on 12.5 acres. Subsidies will make the housing available to low and moderate income families.

Architecturally, the Fox Hills project is the handsomer of the two, with a very sophisticated use of simple elements for considerable richness and surface interest. This may be because it represents the culmination of 18 months of development work, beginning with the prototype and proceeding through the Brooklyn plan to the Staten Island scheme. But both have the same underlying sociological principles and design rationale as the prototype. Changes are adaptive.

The dwellings are grouped to preserve the street and create a neighborhood. All buildings are limited to four stories, and each unit accommodates only four to six families, to facilitate recognition and aid security. As many private family entrances open directly off the street as possible. Play spaces have immediate surveillance from apartments. Most units have private yards. Emphasis is on scale and human needs.

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The Brooklyn adaptation, with a density of 60 units to the acre, introduces some of the qualities of suburban life to an urban area. The Staten Island plan, with 40 units to the acre, is meant to preserve an already threatened suburban character. The neat cardboard models make it clear that the designs provide the old-fashioned amenities of privacy and community.

Stylistically, this housing is a remarkable throwback to the work of the early modernists. There is a strong sense of revivalism, almost of déjà vu. One sees a patent fascination with the 1920's and 30's treatment of forms and surface, and a distinct recall of prototypical European examples of the International Style. But there are front stoops and back yards and not a little suggestion of the 19th-century New York brownstone as well, and the 1920's experimental clustered community of Sunnyside Gardens in Queens.

In many ways, this work looks back to the values of older models and earlier styles. It could be a giant step forward for housing design.