

Miracle for Welfare Island

The proposal for Welfare Island just announced by the city and state must be put in the category of New York miracle. The report and recommendation of the Mayor's Committee on Welfare Island appeared in February; in October, there is a plan. If the lease agreed on by the city and the New York State Urban Development Corporation is acted on by the Board of Estimate on Oct. 23, a new community for 20,000 and five new parks will be completed in eight years. The time limit is in the contract. It would be hard to beat that for pulling new towns, or rabbits, out of a hat.

That kind of speed would be magical anywhere, but in New York it qualifies as a supernatural happening. And it can happen. Just those overriding powers of the Urban Development Corporation that allow it to build anywhere without regard to local codes and processes, and that have generated genuine home rule fears in city breasts, would make it possible. On its best behavior, like a benevolent despot, the U.D.C. has come into New York by negotiation and its undertakings have been determined by mutual agreement. Welfare Island would be its showcase project.

It has produced a plan of quality and style. The proposal scrupulously follows the recommendations of the original report, whose authors admitted the fiscal unreality of moving the existing hospitals and tempered their desire to keep the slender island forever green with the pressing need for housing. They asked for the best of both worlds, and they may well have gotten it.

The Welfare Island plan offers 5,000 housing units at mixed income levels and a series of splendid parks in a pattern of notable sensitivity to human scale, urban living and water views. But for every plan there is a critic and another way to do it, and most New York plans die of dismemberment or politics. The lethal weapon is usually the housing mix. The truth is that every kind of housing is needed in this city, and rarely is any kind of housing offered with this degree of environmental amenity.

The proposal is on exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum until Oct. 23 for viewing and debate. If that debate is constructive and Board of Estimate action is positive, there will be a miracle on Welfare Island. Oddly enough, some New Yorkers still believe in miracles.