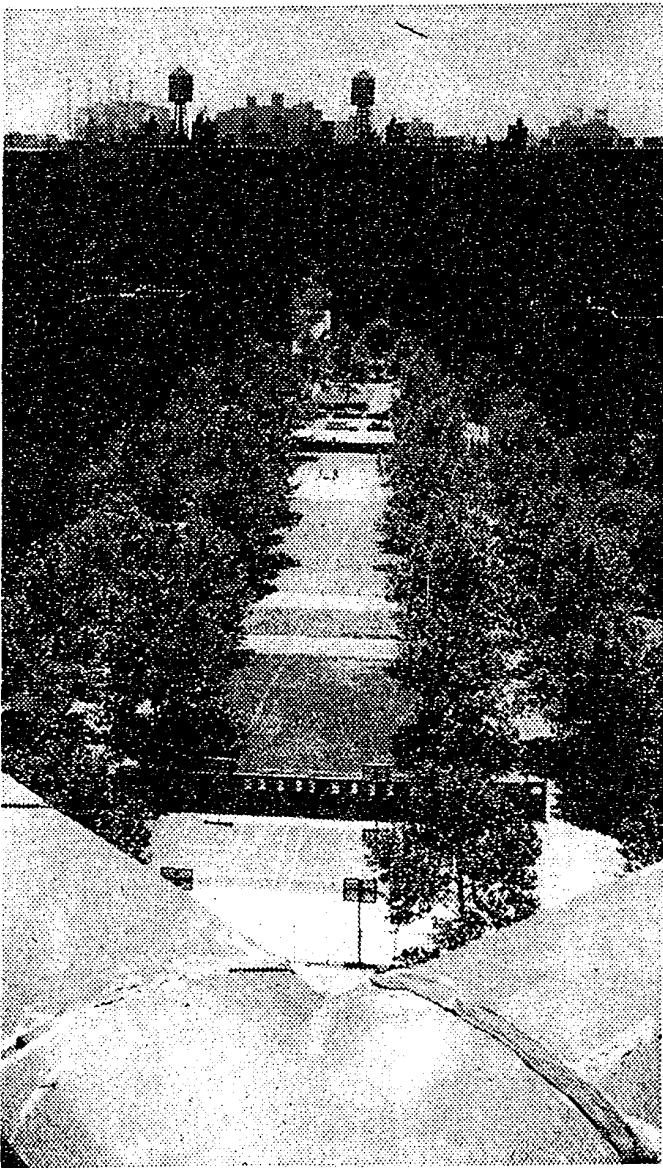


Grass at Riis Houses Giving Way to a Plaza



View of mall extending from 6th to 8th Streets at Jacob Riis Houses, which now features "Keep Off Grass" signs.



Model of recreation plaza, now being developed, which has been designed to encourage use by people of all ages.

Open Space to Be Redeveloped for Use by Tenants

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

They are digging up the grass at Jacob Riis Houses, planted carefully 18 years ago to bring a bit of country to the city in New York's public housing. The "Keep Off the Grass" signs will be replaced by a \$750,000 landscaped recreation plaza, designed to invite people in instead of ordering them out.

A two-block-long grassy mall from Sixth to Eighth Street between Avenue D and the East River Drive, separating the project's tall apartment towers, is being transformed into a complex of brick walks, raised planting beds, play sculpture, climbing walls, cobblestone mounds, concrete steps, hanging greenery, fountains and pools.

Built With Grants

There will be a children's playground, an adult sitting area, a conversation garden for the elderly and a stepped amphitheater that can be transformed into a summer play area, water shortage permitting, with "horse tail" water sprays arching over it and small nozzles sending streams of water down the steps.

Designed by Pomerance & Breines, architects, and M. Paul Friedberg and Associates, landscape architects, the plaza is being built by the New York City Housing Authority with a grant from the Vincent Astor Foundation.

The Riis plaza represents an experimental approach to the use of open space in public housing. It is meant to bring unused, "dead" spaces to life.

Nothing will be fenced off. The experiment is being watched as New York's most progressive effort in park and playground design, with the hope that it will introduce successful new standards and practices into dated housing formulas here and in other cities.

Ironically, the grass that was such a prized feature of the public housing that replaced congested slums 20 years ago has turned out to be a police problem. It is a constant source of conflict between management and tenants.

Trees to Be Saved

Housing Authority police spend much time disciplining residents to save the grass from vandalism and destruction. The result has been rules, chains, fences, an atmosphere of hostility and vast areas of "off limits" space inviting abuses and delinquency.

In older housing such as Jacob Riis, which was built in 1947, the small saplings that dotted the grass have grown into handsome trees. They will all be preserved in the new landscaping.

But the people are as important to the new design as the trees. The objective is what the architects call "a permissive plan—a total environment, and for the children, a continuous play experience." According to Mr. Friedberg, "people are designed into it."

There will be no conventional playground equipment. All play

Plans Call for Play and Visiting Area —Trees to Stay

objects will be integrated with the landscape design: stone mounds with built-in slides, walls and posts to climb, wooden steps leading over areas of sand.

Similar open space plans for low-cost housing have been commissioned by the J. M. Kaplan Foundation and the Lavanburg Foundation.

Many lessons were learned in a smaller project completed last year by the same architects for the George Washington Carver Houses at Madison Avenue and 100th Street. It was also under Vincent Astor Foundation sponsorship.

Adjusted to Needs

The architects found that people gather in groups and prefer streetfront areas. Landscaping cannot be too formal, rigid or sophisticated.

"If children run through planting beds, you give them stepping stones," Simon Breines of the architects' firm said. "They roller skate around raised planters. They invent new street games and variations of old ones on steps. They climb on arbors, so we round the corners of the wood and bevel it to eliminate splinters."

"But the most important lesson is that you can't make people do what they don't want to do," he added. "You've got to find out what they like to do and design for it. It's like rediscovering the wheel."