

Architecture

This Time They Mean It

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THESE are still a few days to see an offbeat show at the Metropolitan Museum called "The Island Nobody Knows." This exposition of the development plan for Welfare Island prepared by the New York State Urban Development Corporation under an agreement with the city will be on view through Oct. 23. The architects are Philip Johnson and John Burgee.

The exhibition is in the fine tradition of London's public display and discussion of planning projects that makes that city a peculiarly civilized place. Public presentation of plans is actually required by law there, and the viewer is provided with a ballot for his suggestions. Out of these comments, once the inevitable rubbish has been trimmed, have come some sensible adjustments and at least one better solution, as in the recent matter of the expansion of the Tate Gallery.

The advantage of the Urban Development Corporation, which will carry out the Welfare Island plan, is that it can get things done. It was created by the state legislature to expedite housing and renewal in New York State by overriding local codes and processes in almost imperial fashion. The disadvantage, which has been the source of local fears, is that it can ignore home rule.

Edward J. Logue, the experienced and frequently controversial renewal administrator who came from New Haven and Boston to head the UDC, is not known for his reticence. But he has acquired all of his UDC projects thus far, including Wel-

fare Island, by exemplary negotiation. Negotiations with the city, in fact, were so protracted that on Oct. 9, when Mayor Lindsay announced the plan, city and state, in Mr. Logue's words, "were still coming to terms at the moment we were walking up the aisle together."

The plan was summarized in the news media at that time. For quick review, it calls for a largely pedestrian island with two "island towns" of clustered, low-rise housing (4 to 12 stories) for 20,000 people. The proposed mix for 5,000 units of housing is 30 per cent low income (including 10 per cent for the elderly), 25 per cent moderate income, 20 per cent middle income, and 25 per cent at the luxury level. There would be five parks—one an innovational 25-acre ecological park—alternating with four building groups. Two of these groups would be the "island towns," the other two the existing Bird S. Coler and Goldwater Memorial Hospitals.

Landmark structures, ranging from the 18th-century Blackwell House (Welfare Island was formerly Blackwell's Island) to an evocative medley of 19th-century city buildings, would be kept and restored. There are some lovely curiosities, such as the octagonal stair tower of the former New York Lunatic Asylum. The plan puts strong emphasis on human scale, water views and island pleasures achieved through the positive uses of urban design.

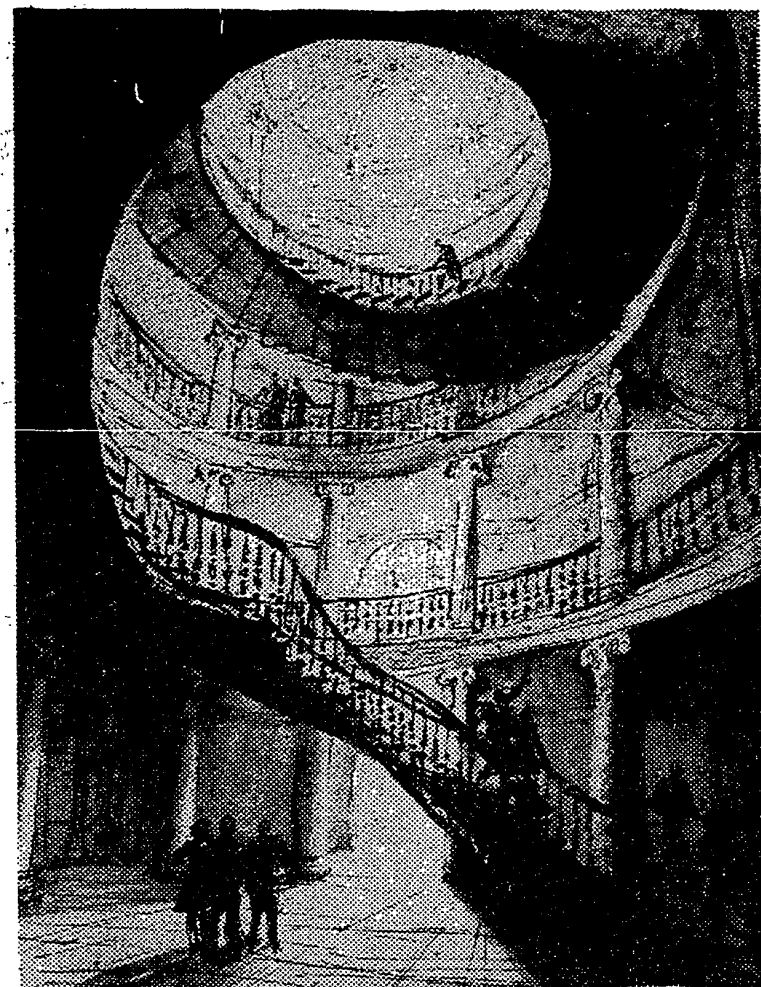
Like the famous definition of equality, in which some things are more equal than others, everything is relative

in New York, but plans are more so. They are born out of compromise with the prospect of further compromise if they ever hope to see the light of day.

In the case of Welfare Island, the study completed in February by the Mayor's Welfare Island Committee concluded that the city could not afford to move the island's hospitals. Committee members felt strongly about keeping as much open space as possible. They would have liked to preserve this remarkable, slightly macabre stretch of unkempt greenery in the East River that could be the setting of an Ingmar Bergman movie, with its abandoned buildings suggesting other levels of time, and they favored it as a major park resource for the boroughs crowding chaotically against its edges.

Inevitably, they bowed to the need for housing, long past crisis proportions. But only to the limit that supporting transportation facilities would allow, and with the understood priority of keeping as much parkland as possible. The plan follows those recommendations.

The customary procedure now is for New Yorkers to attack the plan violently in the most absolute terms possible. There will not be enough housing for some. There will not be enough park for others. It will be scored, above all, for not contributing more to the solution of the desperate problem of housing the poor. The attacks will be focused on social injustice, racism, special privilege, public interest, conspiracy theories and politics. The pressure is usually



Welfare Island Asylum, drawn by Nicholas Solovioff
An octagonal tower and other levels in time

applied on the politically vulnerable Board of Estimate. Its action on the 99-year state lease and contract for this city-owned land is due on Thursday.

It is well worth considering what the development of Welfare Island would be like if left to conventional, or possible New York procedures. The grim picture is one that the critics should keep in mind.

Carried out by private means rather than by the state agency with its special powers, its first premise would have to be different. The basic operating principle would not be the best design, but the best profit. It would have to make money on standard financial terms and every inch of the proposal would stand or fall by that asocial yardstick. Welfare Island will probably show a profit eventually, but far later than the period allowable for return on commercial investment.

No private developer could afford the heavy, long-range capital investment in utilities, services and amenities which will be built at the start. The high cost of money and land and slow payoff would make their provision impossible: Cross out community facilities, pools, day-care centers, plazas and promenades. Cross out the town square, harbor square and galleria. Some of these things might be gotten by maneuvering changes in the zoning law to give builders bonuses to include them — while costs went up.

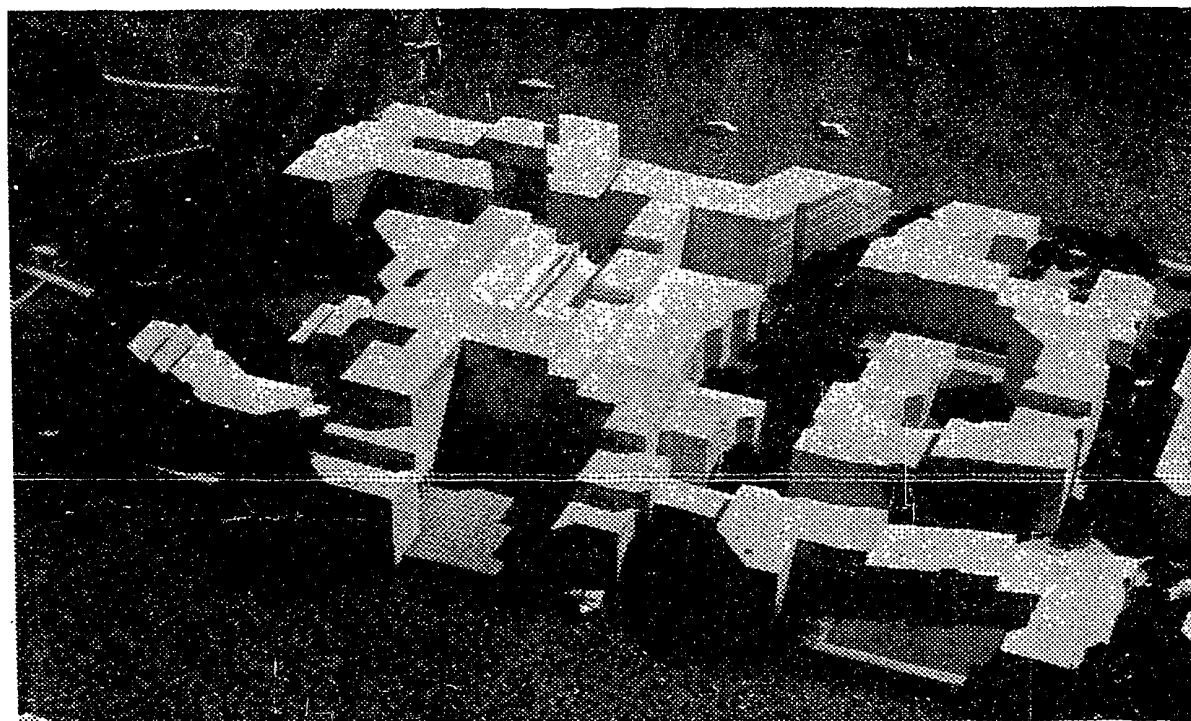
There would be only as

much green space as could be economically subtracted from the financial formula. There would be no landmark preservation to enrich the new community. Any old building on valuable land yielding no return is a certain casualty.

Housing would be subject to the open market equation of high land values, high interest rates and high construction costs, with the possibility of some limited-profit private sponsorship. That means a great deal of "luxury" housing at \$125-150 a room to carry the investment, a frustrating figure to most New Yorkers. And it means maximum densities. The city's zoning would force all housing into cookie-cutter high-rise clichés. Cross out low clusters with green buffer strips between.

That's not all, but it's all we have space for and it makes the picture clear. What a plan conceived in the public interest — as this one is — does, above all, is to set priorities in the public interest. Its basic objective and operating principle is the quality of the environment.

It offers one particularly important thing — a sense of style. This is something New York has conspicuously lacked. Mr. Logue defines it as design appeal to people, or how to make an attractive and pleasurable place to live. To build any other way is to build the slums of the future, the ghettos of the spirit that produce the underprivileged, regardless of color or class. And that is something everyone should remember as the critical brickbats fly.



Welfare Island Plan by the New York State Urban Development Corporation
A 99-year lease and a sense of style—it could happen here

Louis Checkman