

# **Roosevelt Island: Poised for the 1990s**

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Described as a "metropolitan paradox", Roosevelt Island is viewed as a small town in the heart of a big City. An apt description. But it's more. It is an example of a bold public initiative, conceived in the days when government power and largesse were thought endless, but born in an era of fiscal insecurity and government retrenchment.

In the 60's, "Welfare Island" was home mainly to abandoned institutions, crumbling hospitals and prisons that bore witness to less than sympathetic attitudes toward the City's sick and needy. While the 147-acre strip of land on the East River has not always been a pleasing place, it has symbolized the changing lives of New Yorkers since Europeans came to the New World: first it was farmland, then "Welfare Island," and now, a place where people of mixed income and ethnic diversity live within minutes, but a world away from the metropolis.

1990 Marks the 21st anniversary of the Roosevelt Island concept. Recommendations back in the 60's included a community of prisons, a fancy resort, the site of a sports stadium, a high-density high-rise development, and sale to the highest

bidder for whatever use was deemed most profitable.

Thanks however, to the Welfare Island planning committee, appointed by Mayor Lindsay, and New York State's ongoing commitment to affordable housing, Roosevelt Island became a community we view with pride today. In looking back on the 20 years since the City and State signed the lease for Roosevelt Island, it's clear that we are more than a social experiment. We actually reflect the changing tides of government's role and the vicissitudes of our region's economy.

The early vision knew no bounds. Housing for 20,000 New Yorkers neatly dispersed through income ranges; a car-free Main Street with electric buses silently conveying residents to a subway line extending from Manhattan to Kennedy Airport; hotels, marinas, office space; an underground vacuum to whisk away garbage at 80 miles an hour; landmarked ruins restored, public parks and ecological study centers for City schools, and a memorial to Franklin Roosevelt at our very southern tip.

The funding would flow without question from UDC bond issues, Mitchell-Lama Housing incentives and the Federal government, with no sunset seen for HUD initiatives such as its "new communities" and Section 236 programs.

The 70's however, brought the reality we all know too intimately. The spectre

of UDC almost defaulting on its bonds, the subway tracks to Eastern Queens forgotten, the Federal government's withdrawal from housing programs - the City and State caught short.

Roosevelt Island, by no means UDC's only project, was perhaps its most visible during these gloomy times and had unfairly earned the reputation of bringing UDC to the brink of disaster. In fact, there were no bonds specifically issued for Roosevelt Island, which was a part of the general UDC financing.

When push came to shove, only a portion of this exquisitely planned community was built. The plan fell apart as UDC scrambled to beat the unravelling of the local economy. Given logistics, the southern development should have come first, but Northtown was built, because demolition had been completed there. The Z-blocks that pave the streets rest in sand, not asphalt as specified; express buses were called in to take early settlers to Manhattan as the subway became mired in muck and politics, and electric buses went the way of the Edsel.

Through the mid 80's the dreams for Roosevelt Island were put on hold by the fiscal strains that squeezed New York. Measured solely by numbers of housing units produced and revenue generated, Roosevelt Island may not have appeared to fulfill its promise. However, even in its incomplete physical state, it is an achievement of

governmental aspirations. In truth, a diverse, stable, safe community of affordable, high quality housing was built. According to Ed Logue - "It demonstrates that given the proper circumstances people of varying incomes, races and ethnic origins would be able to live happily in one area..." And lest you think that Ed Logue may not be wholly objective in this area - the Institution of Public Administration in a report this past November said that Roosevelt Island was an example of what "Instruments of government can achieve".

Visit Roosevelt Island today as we encourage with the walking tour maps by your plates, and you will find a community of racial and economic balance. A place with crime so low that in some categories we don't even warrant statistics. A place with open spaces and open skies, where children can ride their bikes safely -- and still get their homework done. (Our public school has some of the highest reading scores in New York City.) It's a vital community that is much in demand. I am told that the average wait for an apartment in Rivercross, the Island's only co-op, is 14 years.

After a 10-year hiatus, Governor Cuomo rekindled the visions for Roosevelt Island. He saw that what had been built for little more than 5,000 New Yorkers could be expanded for many more. For 10 years Roosevelt Island was run by little more than a maintenance operation, first through a variety of UDC subsidiaries, then as

offshoots of the State Division of Housing. On the Governor's initiative the Legislature created the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC), an independent public authority, which took over in January 1986, to operate, manage and develop Roosevelt Island. I am proud to be its first President and Chief Operating Officer.

Our mandate was pretty clear: figure out how to run the tram, despite the national insurance crisis; improve the quality of life for current residents without additional operating funds; restore the neglected infrastructure within a parsimonious capital budget; develop affordable housing with no evident public monies to speak of.

Gifted with a dedicated staff responsive to new leadership, RIOC spent its first year improving and streamlining operations. Creative lawyers, an inspired Governor and a cooperative Attorney General fashioned State indemnification so that the tram, carrying 1.8 Million riders annually, could continue without being saddled by insurance profiteers. A persistent Transit Authority opened the subway. And, thanks to the Ayatollah Khomeini, we built more affordable housing!

The Starrett Housing Corporation had a Section 8 commitment from the Carter Administration to produce the next phase of housing for Roosevelt Island. But the company's holdings in Iran were caught up in the revolution. In a unique act of housing support, the Reagan Administration saw fit to "grandfather" the Section 8

funding. In 1988, when Starrett and Cohen Brothers Realty joint venturing as Roosevelt Island Associates broke ground, we benefitted from among the last remaining Section 8 new construction money in New York. Manhattan Park, as it's now known, produced 220 units of low income housing and 880 units of market rate, when it opened a year ago. And, despite the glut in the City, the market rate units are 70 percent occupied. The Section 8 units are of course, completely full.

Although more housing was always planned, because of passage of time and change of priorities, Manhattan Park departed from the original general development plan. Demographically, it added to the highest and lowest ends of the targeted income groups, but not to the middle categories and not enough to the low. Design-wise Architects Peter Samton and Jordan Gruzen wisely broke from the Main Street "spine" model, creating more public open space and views of the water.

RIOC, instead of reacting to historical events and economic cycles, and waiting around for elusive housing monies, is taking a more pro-active planning and development role. Raquel Ramati has been working with us for the past 3 years, updating the master plan to meet planning standards and housing needs of the 90's. She'll detail the principles and goals we have developed. I'll mention just a few changes: Overall population has been reduced from 20,000 to the 12,000 range, when the last phase of residential development, Southtown, is completed. Density was

reduced by dropping 500,000 square feet of office and commercial space. Public open space is dramatically increased, and community facilities, for both recreation and services have been added.

Raquel's planning talents are coupled with our Chairman, State Housing Commissioner Richard Higgins' leadership and inventiveness. Rick has put together an innovative cross-subsidy program and other financing mechanisms so that more homes for the original income groups, ranging from \$16,000 to \$50,000 annually, can be produced.

Southtown, our showpiece, is by no means our only activity. Capitalizing on Roosevelt Island's renewal, HCK Recreation is building a multi-million dollar indoor tennis facility and club house, scheduled to open this summer. A 15,000 square foot playground is being rebuilt according to plans jointly developed by RIOC and community representatives, financed primarily by proceeds from Manhattan Park. The School Construction Authority is breaking ground this spring for an 800 seat elementary and intermediate school. A plan for a 13-acre park, including ballfields, community gardens, and, yes, an ecological study center has been devised, through an unprecedented community participation process, which will serve as a model for a conference this spring sponsored by the University of Virginia.

Of course, the plan conceived 20 years ago is not complete yet. Two decades later, after weathering New York's fiscal crisis and cuts in Federal housing programs, Roosevelt Island is poised for the 90's. News of the current economy are reminiscent of the gloom and doom of the 70's. Just as the City is better prepared to weather economic buffets, so is Roosevelt Island. Rick will describe some strategies for financing Southtown, despite the slump in the housing market in New York. And our other projects are moving forward, with Roosevelt Island less dependant on government funding and more creative in using public/private partnerships.

In the past, Roosevelt Island has reflected general housing programs and attitudes, it has been a victim of politics and economics. But in the 90's we are taking charge of our own destiny. We're figuring out more autonomous financing techniques, and we are moving ahead with a series of progressive initiatives. The dream of the 60's has been updated to come true in the 90's.

As we enter our third decade, RIOC will be looking back at the past 20 years - and the years before, when the cigar-shaped island was known as Welfare, Blackwell, Hog's and Minnahanock.

This year, we will celebrate our history with events like a retrospective exhibit, co-sponsored with the Municipal Art Society and the Landmarks Conservancy at the

Urban Center in March and a series of events to mark our success as a growing, mixed income community. We welcome the opportunity the City Club has given us, to kick off this 20 year retrospective.

The 1990's hold lots of challenges as well as promises for New Yorkers. Roosevelt Island, with its plan for more affordable housing, improved parks and recreation, and open spaces, and a new school, has finished with its adolescence, and, at 21, has matured to meet the 1990's.

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