Roosevelt Island: Exception to a City in Crisis

Yonah Freemark

Abstract
Today, New York City’s Roosevelt Island stands as living proof that the public sector can produce a mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhood from scratch. Its successes contrast with typical perceptions of government housing failure and indicate that with determined leadership, stable funding, and a good location, the public sector can create healthy, heterogeneous neighborhoods. This article examines the process of designing and constructing Roosevelt Island to illustrate how and why local actors took advantage of favorable conditions and made important political choices to achieve their commitments, even as political and financial support for such developments deteriorated. In light of the often dismal reputation of government housing policy in the United States, Roosevelt Island’s success—unique in its mixed-income legacy—offers lessons about effective city governance in the face of dwindling national support.

Keywords
New York City, public housing, urban renewal, Urban Development Corporation, Nelson Rockefeller

Introduction

The whole point of Roosevelt Island is that it’s an extraordinary example of the huge turn in American social policy. We were the last significant public program that was effective.1 (Paul Byard, former Urban Development Corporation Counsel)

Today, New York City’s Roosevelt Island stands as living proof that the public sector can produce a mixed-income and mixed-race neighborhood from scratch. With demographics closely matching those of the city as a whole, the island is neither a luxurious enclave nor a “project” ghetto; rather, it has been a surprisingly stable mix of the city’s population since its housing towers first opened in the mid-1970s. Its successes contrast with typical perceptions of government housing failure and indicate that with determined leadership, stable funding, and a good location, the public sector can create healthy, heterogeneous neighborhoods. This article examines the process of designing and constructing Roosevelt Island to illustrate how and why local actors took advantage of favorable conditions and made choices to achieve their commitments, even as political and financial support for such developments deteriorated. In light of the

1Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Yonah Freemark, M.I.T. Department of Urban Studies and Planning, City Design and Development Program, Room 10-485, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139
Email: freemark@mit.edu
often dismal reputation of government housing policy in the United States, the success of politicians and architects in constructing a mixed-income community on Roosevelt Island offers lessons about effective city governance in the face of dwindling national support.

In early 1973, President Richard Nixon’s administration placed a moratorium on government housing subsidies and established a committee to develop new policies for meeting the 1949 Housing Act’s goal of “a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family.” In September, armed with his committee’s report, the president told Congress “the Federal Government has become the biggest slumlord in history” and urged it to get “out of the housing business.” This directive included the new towns program, which was designed to create model, well-planned communities as opposed to urban blight or suburban sprawl. Nixon’s successor Gerald Ford signed these proposals into law in 1974, virtually eliminating funds for new public sector housing and cementing the end of the era of government-directed urbanism. Instead, Washington would subsidize private sector production and local nonprofits through vouchers and Community Development Block Grants, marking the dawn of conservative American urban policy.

Nixon’s decision to terminate funding for public projects signaled a general distrust of the federal bureaucracy’s ability to handle city building and the failure of big-government liberalism. The public housing and urban renewal programs had been informed by an idealistic version of environmental determinism premised on the ideas that ameliorating a person’s accommodations would improve quality of life and that government should play the principal role in meeting the basic need for shelter. But these programs galvanized detractors across the political spectrum, from conservative Martin Anderson, whose book *The Federal Bulldozer* (1964) argued that such projects would have been more effective had they been undertaken by the private sector, to progressive Jane Jacobs (1961), who resented the projects’ “superblock” style of urbanism. Later critiques focusing on poverty, crime, and segregation made government-produced housing even less attractive.

Yet, this narrative of government’s involvement in housing is inadequate and does not reflect its positive results. Nicholas Bloom’s recent *Public Housing that Worked* (2008) documents the successes of the New York City Housing Authority, demonstrating how good management of sturdily constructed buildings, routine maintenance, and staff supervision produce well-kept and safe apartment towers despite the devastating poverty of their inhabitants. Administrators, he argues, “have made clear choices that determined the outcome” of the city’s public housing, following practices used in New York’s numerous examples of upper-income apartments to prevent the buildings from falling into disrepair. Convinced of the benefits of a mixed-income environment, officials also bolstered public housing by encouraging working-class individuals to live in projects alongside the poor, thereby further stabilizing the community. Bloom’s argument suggests that the well-known failures of housing complexes like Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis or Cabrini-Green in Chicago are only one side of the story and that the public sector can be an effective producer of quality housing.

The planning and redevelopment of Roosevelt Island was a decade-long process carried out by New York State’s Urban Development Corporation (UDC). New York Governor Rockefeller chartered the UDC as a quasi-governmental agency that could circumvent standard city zoning and building codes. The island, the organization’s largest project, exemplified Rockefeller’s ambition to use the UDC to create mixed-income communities and the success of UDC President Edward Logue in implementing the project. Even as it created a complex of towers not dramatically different from those berated by public housing’s critics, the city avoided population removal and created not a slum but a neighborhood that continues to attract people of all races and classes.
The island’s construction was in part a reaction to an emerging public policy consensus that the city itself was in crisis because of middle-class outmigration to the suburbs, leaving increasing numbers of poor minorities in the inner cities. These unfavorable demographic changes, taking place as American cities deindustrialized, reduced the tax base while increasing the need for social services. Roosevelt Island’s mixed-income nature was an attempt to address these problems through class integration and was the result of the collective effort of three of that era’s most prominent, and by some accounts most controversial, policymakers—urban renewal developer Logue, Governor Rockefeller, and New York City Mayor John Lindsay—each of whom staked his career on the success of new government-produced housing. Each felt that Roosevelt Island could serve as an attractive place to raise middle-income white children even as it provided better homes for poor minorities.

This study’s principal goal is to demonstrate that the presence of strong financing from the state and federal governments, a corresponding degree of political support, and an excellent location made this project not only feasible but also sustainable. Grants and loans from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the UDC’s state-backed bond releases made the project viable. The leadership of the governor and the UDC in undertaking the project, as well as the mayor’s willingness to open the island to construction, made the development a reality. Additionally, the island’s proximity to Manhattan and its strong transit connections meant that higher income people had an incentive to live close to less affluent individuals.

By placing the island’s reconstruction in the broader context of contemporary public concerns about the “city in crisis” and comparing it to other public inner-city housing projects, this study will attempt to demonstrate how Roosevelt Island’s unique mixed-income and mixed-race character was possible. This article provides an historical account of the development (Figure 1), drawing on an in-depth review of the archival papers of the principal actors as well as a series of interviews with individuals involved with the development process. Roosevelt Island’s implementation serves as a useful example for how the public sector can produce a high-quality housing project that remains faithful to the goals set out for it. Documentation of its history points out an overlooked but effective path toward realizing subsidized housing in the future.

City in Crisis

The worst enemy of urban progress is the cynical notion that our big cities’ problems are incapable of solution: it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When our young, ambitious couples believe it, hundreds of thousands of them flee to the suburbs, and the city loses civic energies and economic resources badly needed for change and improvement of city life.8 (John Lindsay, Mayor of New York City)

The New York City of the early 1960s faced two seemingly irreconcilable problems: a declining tax base and an increasing demand for basic services. The national government subsidized home construction in the suburbs through low-interest loans from the Federal Housing Administration, and its Interstate Highway System improved automobile access. Washington, however, provided few subsidies for multi-unit housing or mass transit. Simultaneously, hundreds of thousands of impoverished blacks and Puerto Ricans migrated north seeking new economic possibilities, but they found substandard housing and fewer and fewer manufacturing jobs, as the city was better at creating jobs for the rich—people who might live in the suburbs—than the poor, who had no such choice.9 Between 1940 and 1970, the city’s white population decreased from 94 percent to 62 percent even as the overall number of inhabitants remained
Figure 1. Maps by the author.
Source: Gruen, East Island Plan; Johnson and Burgee, Welfare Island Plan; Roosevelt Island Main Street Wire Online Map (http://nyc10044.com/wire/2722/map2722.pdf).

relatively steady. Meanwhile, according to a 1966 study by the Graduate School of Public Administration at New York University, “the City’s expenditures have been increasing far more rapidly than the wealth and income generated by the City’s economy.” The city was becoming the domain of the minority poor, but it could not afford the public services they needed. New York needed help to recover from its midcentury blues.  

Local, state, and federal governments had made some stuttering—and underfunded—attempts to address overall housing needs. Beginning in 1934, federal public housing funds financed the New York City Housing Authority, which by 1956 had built 88,000 units in eighty projects.
The 1961 Housing Act’s 221(d)(3) program subsidized inner-city homes for moderate-income families for the first time by reducing mortgage costs for developers. New York State’s 1955 Mitchell-Lama housing law subsidized new housing for the middle class by expanding access to eminent domain, providing tax abatements, and introducing low-interest mortgages for willing developers. Federal and state governments had fashioned a series of financial tools that local authorities could use to fund housing. But problems remained: in a 1968 study, the President’s Committee on Urban Housing reported that 10 percent of the nation’s dwellings were substandard, that six million units were overcrowded, and that very few units were vacant. New York was particularly affected because of its high land prices that resulted in housing costs beyond the means of the middle and lower classes.\textsuperscript{11}

In September 1965, President Johnson created the cabinet-level Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which soon implemented the Section 23 program, providing public housing funds for renting in private rental units, rather than only in public buildings, as previously required. The 1968 Housing Act encouraged the private market to invest in affordable housing with increased subsidies to moderate-income families in Section 236.\textsuperscript{12} The president’s commitment to new housing also encompassed the Title VII program, which provided funds for mixed-race and mixed-income “new towns.” The new towns were model communities, situated away from existing development. They represented a departure from the contemporary understanding of public housing; homes for people of multiple classes would be interspersed, with the goal of avoiding the physical stigma of typical public housing by appearing integrated—there would be no separate, obvious “projects.”\textsuperscript{13}

The United States had experimented previously with new towns, having developed several exurban “greenbelt” towns during the New Deal inspired by the ideals of Ebenezer Howard. A nineteenth-century English urbanist, Howard envisioned what he called “garden cities” located far from the urban core that would provide people better, healthier lives, with easier access to parks, little pollution, and stress-free commutes. In addition to housing, these towns would offer jobs, shopping, and recreation.\textsuperscript{14} Establishing a mixed-income environment, where people of all classes lived in harmony, was an essential goal for these communities. The government did not continue to sponsor the greenbelt program after the war, but a number of private corporations hoped to create idealistic new cities on their model at the edge of metropolitan areas. Columbia, Maryland, Reston, Virginia, and Irvine, California, were the most prominent and began planning just as the government authorized its own 1960s new towns program.\textsuperscript{15}

John Lindsay, congressman from New York since 1959, was also interested in the multic peace.

What remained unclear, however, was whether mixing classes would produce beneficial outcomes. Sociologist Herbert Gans, who wrote about the displacement of the inhabitants of Boston’s West End, questioned the value of integration and argued that the poor would resent the “idea that they should live with their so-called betters in order to improve their ways of living.” Though Gans admitted that superficial integration could be achieved, he argued that
“micro-integration”—at the block level—was virtually impossible because most people do not want to live with those they consider their inferiors by virtue of class or race. Was there any point in attempting to create a community that matched the demographics of the city as a whole? On the other hand, housing segregation enforced existing class hierarchies. Poor neighborhoods, disenfranchised from the political and economic system, were less likely to receive quality services than richer ones. As a result, for many urban planners, many of whom held powerful positions in federal, state, and local governments, the ideal of the mixed neighborhood continued to inspire policymaking.17

Welfare Island

We felt that the uniqueness of this island was, of course, its very insularity—the romance of an island, combined with the excitement of a vast metropolis just a few hundred feet away.18 (Philip Johnson and John Burgee, Architects)

Hemmed in by the straits of the East River, the two-mile long Roosevelt Island—known as Welfare Island between 1921 and 1973—is closer to New York’s prosperous midtown office district than anywhere outside of Manhattan. Its 143 acres offer fantastic views and three-hundred-year-old ruins. There is little doubt that land there, were it for sale, would fetch a high asking price. And yet, even at the height of the late 1960s’ building boom that transformed New York’s skyline, Welfare Island remained unknown to the majority of New Yorkers. Some spent time in decrepit island hospitals; others worked at the city laundry plant and trained at a fire department school. Visitors boarded trolleys or buses at the feet of the 59th Street Bridge and traveled to its halfway point, where they took an elevator down to the desolate strip of land below. It was not an enjoyable trip.19

Expansion of the Manhattan business district was at the time a priority for both the city and developers, who knew they could profit from the highly valued land. Welfare Island was ideally situated to increase housing and office space, and the private sector began lining up. In 1959, a developer announced a plan for 2,400 units there, but no progress was made. Two years later, influential real estate magnate Frederick W. Richmond hired architect Victor Gruen to plan for the island’s renovation into a mini-city. Gruen, who is known for “inventing” the indoor mall with the Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, believed that neighborhoods should be centered on walkable shopping areas. Gruen’s concept for Welfare Island—which Richmond wanted renamed “East Island”—also revolved around retail space. But Richmond planned to make his money on the 24,000 apartments to be constructed above the shopping center. The buildings would be arrayed along the entire two-mile length of the island, replacing the existing hospitals and creating a huge visual barrier of thirty- and fifty-story high rises between Manhattan and Queens.20

Richmond and Gruen designed East Island in part to counter the out-migration of New York’s middle-income families. Their plan stated that “Manhattan appears to be in danger of becoming a place where only the poor and the very wealthy can live;” excessive traffic, poor schools, and a dearth of affordable rental apartments were driving out the middle class. East Island would serve “families with or without children, where the husband and wife earn their livelihood in Manhattan.” Its construction would be subsidized by the state’s Mitchell-Lama program, which could be used for both public and private sector projects. But concerned by the lack of transportation facilities as well as recreation space, Mayor Robert Wagner rejected the plan and announced that the city would not sell or lease the island to private interests “except in cases of overriding necessity.”21
In fact, Wagner’s own administration was considering a new subway tunnel under the East River between central Queens and East Midtown that would relieve the congested transit lines between the two boroughs. In 1961, planning commenced, and by 1965, the tunnel’s route was approved: it would run directly under Welfare Island, where a station would open by 1975. The decision to include a stop there once again prompted interest from developers. Indeed, Richmond restated his interest in buying the land, citing the improved transportation and the still excellent location. But Mayor Wagner rejected proposals to rebuild the island, arguing instead that the city invest in neighboring Astoria, across the river in Queens. The mayor showed little interest in building an audacious mini-city, even in conjunction with the subway expansion the transit authority had proposed that would undoubtedly spur investment if given the chance.22

In 1965, Congressman John Lindsay ran for mayor as a reform Republican cross-listed on the Liberal Party line, arguing that Wagner had ignored the city’s problems. Though focused on improving the city’s economy and bolstering the status of New York’s low- and middle-income citizenry, Lindsay’s campaign platform called for a vast increase in the city’s inventory of government-supported housing and the creation of a rent subsidy program for renters in private apartments. In Washington, Lindsay had been a vocal advocate of federal funds for housing. In 1960, aware of the dearth of new non-luxury apartments in urban centers, Lindsay proposed that housing be considered a “public utility,” provided for all at a reasonable price; in 1963, he proposed the federal financing of 160,000 middle-income units. By the time he ran for mayor, he called housing “the most pressing problem of New York City.” Though Lindsay did not explicitly endorse mixed-income housing, the seeds of his interest in such living patterns sprouted early in his career. In an address to the New York Liberal Party before he was elected, he argued that “the better-off must finally learn that there are no islands anymore; that their security can be protected and preserved only if those less fortunate are rescued from the long night of misery and deprivation.” All of society, in other words, would benefit from the mixing of classes.23

Lindsay assumed office on January 1, 1966, convinced that he could reshape his city. But his administration was soon riddled by conflict. A two-week-long transit strike paralyzed the city; Lindsay, unwilling to play the political game of give-and-take for which his Democratic predecessor had been known, could not bargain effectively and eventually acceded completely to the strikers’ demands. But the mayor’s problems were not limited to strikers: the city’s Mitchell-Lama program was out of money; there were no funds to finance additional middle-class apartments, and the already squeezed budget would not provide a reprieve. The mayor, as Lindsay learned instantly, could not control every aspect of the city’s affairs. But Lindsay did not give up; he wanted to push ahead with his aggressive development plans for new housing, and Welfare Island was at the top of the list.24

The State Enters

It matters not how steep the freight,
How charged with negatives the poll,
I am the captain of the state,
I have comfort of my role.25 (A Rockefeller staff member, parodying the governor)

For lack of housing, urban renewal projects are delayed, because families cannot be relocated; for lack of urban renewal, tax revenues are lost; for lack of tax revenues, municipal services suffer; for lack of adequate services, neighborhoods deteriorate, decent citizens flee, tax bases diminish, and slums grow.26 (Nelson Rockefeller, in a report by the Study Committee for Urban Middle-Income Housing)
Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s decision to form the New York Urban Development Corporation and his willingness to empower it with unprecedented financing and political support made the development of Welfare Island possible. Rockefeller was an entrepreneurial politician: under his watch, New York developed a state university system, built a giant government complex in Albany, and constructed ninety thousand housing units for low-income families. The middle level of the federal system, so frequently a minor player in urban policy, was energized as Rockefeller argued that state government was the financial and political apparatus best equipped to redevelop cities and stimulate economic development. In 1963, he said that states “can and should serve as the leaders in planning, and the catalysts in developing cooperative action at the local-state-federal levels.”27 By the mid-1960s, Rockefeller recognized the systemic hurdles faced by the state’s cities and understood that because of their declining financial health, they would not be able to improve their housing stock unless the state came to the rescue. He was willing to put the powers of his office behind such efforts.

In 1964 and 1965 the governor sponsored referendums to increase the state’s constitutional limit on releasing “legal obligation” bonds, guaranteed by the state to investors in case of project failure, to finance low-income housing construction, but both failed at the polls. The Housing Finance Agency, which Rockefeller established in 1960 to subsidize middle-income projects, provided diminishing returns as construction costs slowly increased. New York City was not handling the situation any better; while Wagner had averaged more than eleven thousand new units of housing a year during his third term, Lindsay, even with his big ambitions, was only capable of producing 5,500 in his first. Conscious of the city’s failings, the governor in 1968 proposed the UDC, a state governmental authority that could build housing without municipal interference. Since any increase in “legal obligation” bonds required a statewide referendum, something voters were likely to reject considering earlier proposals, the governor chose to finance the UDC with “moral obligation” bonds, which were not guaranteed. This way the state could take out debt without needing the approval of the electorate. Investor trust in the state’s “moral obligation” would have to ensure the UDC’s financing.28

For its projects, the UDC would direct the entire process, including site planning, funding, and construction. It would also significantly expand the public sector’s traditional role in housing, moving from low-income development alone to middle-income projects. The governor wanted to guarantee the nascent UDC’s effectiveness, so he chose as its leader Logue, who had proven particularly adept at attracting federal funds to New Haven and Boston as urban renewal director in both cities. Rockefeller’s relatively good relationship with President Johnson was similarly appealing to the ambitious Logue.

Logue’s vision meshed well with that of Rockefeller, as both saw physical improvement as a necessary ingredient for societal advancement, but neither was satisfied with older models of urban renewal. Logue wrote that “the single most important element” of renewal was new low- and middle-income housing. He envisioned public housing projects as “small, well-designed and integrated into a stable residential community,” in contrast to more typical megaproject high-rise developments, which required neighborhood demolition and that were by then derided as social failures. In a separate Lindsay-commissioned 1966 report on New York, Logue wrote that the city’s most serious problem was “its failure to provide decent housing in a suitable environment for more than one million New Yorkers.”29 Together, with the UDC’s financial and political strength at their fingertips, Logue and Rockefeller would attempt to develop solutions to that problem.

Rockefeller’s legislation to form the UDC under Logue’s directorship, introduced on February 27, 1968, faced widespread political opprobrium. With Logue’s encouragement, the governor expanded the UDC’s powers to include the right to override zoning and the use of eminent domain in the state’s cities (Logue feared that without such powers, the governor would be
“at the mercy of John Lindsay”). Unsurprisingly, both Mayor Lindsay and The New York Times editorial page urged the state legislature to strip the organization of these powers. For his part, Lindsay was afraid that Logue would become another Robert Moses, the imperious former head of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority who had demolished vast sections of the city for his building and road projects.30 Lindsay would have to overcome his initial disinclination toward UDC involvement, though, if his city was going to profit from state investment.

The governor recognized that his bill was likely to fail in the State Assembly, sensitive to local concerns. But after the April 4, 1968, assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rockefeller took advantage of the widespread fear that riots would ensue (such as those in Watts and Detroit in previous years) to push for the bill’s passage—it would be “a memorial to Reverend King,” he said. The first time around, the bill failed, but Rockefeller—at King’s funeral in Atlanta—called political leaders and persuaded them to change their minds, and the assembly passed the bill. Looking back, the governor said “I got my people on the phone, got the leaders . . . this was the one time I really let loose politically.” Rockefeller was willing to put his political power on the line for the bill’s passage, and he made it happen.31

Getting Serious

Good. What’s the housing mix?32 (John Lindsay, in response to a memo from aide Nat Leventhal, in reference to a new housing project being built by the city)

In 1967, with the new subway station planned, Mayor Lindsay formed a “citizens’ group” of several of New York’s most prominent to study Welfare Island’s future. Lindsay convinced a number of business executives to cover the study’s $3.5 million cost. Chairman Benno Schmidt was a lawyer, venture capitalist, trustee of the Whitney Museum, and chairman of the Fund for New York. Among other members were Brooke Astor, a major philanthropist and chairman of the Vincent Astor Foundation; William Bernbach, New York’s most famous advertiser; Ralph Bunche, Nobel Peace Prize Winner for his work at the United Nations; Irving Mitchell Felt, chairman of Madison Square Garden; and Alex Rose, chairman of the influential Liberal Party and a close friend of Lindsay.33 The mayor’s choices reflected his seriousness about investing in the island’s development: by engaging big names in the process, he could guarantee support from the city’s powerful and improve his chances for success.

The committee’s February 1969 report provided the basis for the island’s subsequent development. Most important was its conclusion that four thousand units of housing be built, far fewer than the East Island group had suggested eight years before. Arguing that “the design should avoid a wall of high-rise buildings creating a visual barrier that would be inappropriate to the valley that divides Queens and Manhattan” (a swipe at the East Island plan), the report stated that the point of the project was not “to make a substantial contribution to the city’s housing needs.” Rather, Welfare Island was intended to be a model for a relatively small but well-designed residential community.34

Like Mayor Wagner, this committee rejected the island’s sale to private interests, even as it conceded that “the optimum economic use of Welfare Island would be exclusively for luxury units.” The committee wanted to use the island for redistributive purposes rather than simply financial ones. Even as it argued that the city needed to “stem the outflow of middle income families, whose departure has helped to rend the social fabric of deteriorating neighborhoods,” the committee contended that “the greatest social need in the housing field is for adequate quarters for the large numbers of low-income families.” The committee therefore urged that housing satisfy the needs of members of all income groups to ensure a financially stable and equitable
development process. New York would continue in the tradition it had begun in public housing of using government funds to create mixed-income communities.

A contemporaneous UDC document on potential housing sites concluded that “the island represents a very strategically placed, largely vacant land resource with excellent development potential.” Also, “the ready availability of land, already owned by the City of New York and largely unused or underused, would remove one major source of delay, community resistance, and case expense normally involved in a housing project.” The uniqueness of Welfare Island’s physical characteristics and its proximity to midtown made it possible to imagine what in other areas would have been considered utopian: poor and rich living side-by-side on an eight-hundred-foot-wide strip of land. The principal elements of the committee’s plan—the mixed-income community, the idea of an enclave separated by water from city crime, and the orientation around a car-free, pedestrian-focused core—were all derivations of Gruen’s failed East Island plan proposed fewer than ten years before. Gruen deserves credit for establishing many of the basic principles for Welfare Island development. The UDC, however, had to establish a realistic financial plan that would also receive political support; the East Island proposal itself had met neither of these requirements.

The mayor’s committee advocated a “single managing organization,” suggesting either a “special-purpose development corporation” (such as that being used concurrently for Lower Manhattan’s Battery Park City) or a new subsidiary of the recently established UDC, which was undertaking dozens of projects throughout the state. Though the island was municipal land, the limited ability of the city to issue construction bonds would prevent it from sponsoring new housing. Unlike the city, whose projects were often beset by citizen criticism and economic problems, the UDC—untroubled by the democratic process and well financed—emerged as the ideal candidate for the island’s development. When Logue and city representatives first met to discuss the subject in July 1968, according to the minutes of the meeting, the UDC’s president stated that he wanted “to help the City by doing projects the City wanted and needed.” Writing in August to Richard Buford, director of the City Planning Commission, Logue reasoned that “Welfare Island represents a significant development opportunity for New York City” and that the UDC would be an appropriate partner in building “a balanced residential community.” He implied that the city could not do the job itself and proclaimed that the UDC was committed to a mixed-income project.

By November, three months before the release of the committee’s report, the city and the UDC had agreed on a basic program of five hundred to one thousand units of elderly housing and four thousand to six thousand units of housing for low- and moderate-income families. The project did not include the middle- and upper-income dwellings later proposed by the committee. By the next year, however, the committee’s public proposal for a truly mixed-income community gained support, and the initial agreement between the UDC and the city would be altered. The committee commissioned Philip Johnson and John Burgee, two of New York’s most prominent architects (Johnson was also a committee member), to develop a series of massing models to sketch out the project; these ideas were presented at the Metropolitan Museum. Lindsay, impressed by the work of the committee, tagged the island’s redevelopment as one of his major policy initiatives of 1969 and referred to it as “the most under-utilized island in the world,” arguing that it was a vital component of his citywide goal of 800,000 new housing units.

A Program for Development

The way the courtyards were to be used, and the way that the first floors of the building were welcoming, the way the church was restored as a community facility. All these things
were integral to the idea of the island as a mixed-income community.\textsuperscript{40} (Theodore Liebman, former UDC Chief of Architecture)

In their proposal, architects Johnson and Burgee called Welfare Island a “multi-mix” town; it would not only be integrated racially and economically, but it would also offer residential structures, offices, retail shops, and recreational opportunities in parks. The waterfront would play a central role. Apartment terraces would each have river views: “they are the hanging gardens of a new Babylon. . . . Regardless of rent, all apartments will share in these amenities.” The town center, which would comprise the subway station, an enclosed mall, an outdoor plaza, and a riverfront park, was compared soberly to Milan’s Galleria Vittoria Emmanuele and the ghats leading into India’s River Ganges; the riverbanks themselves would mimic Paris’.\textsuperscript{41} Johnson and Burgee were promoting an unabashedly idealistic vision.

The plan envisioned the same sort of centrally located but middle-class and child-friendly enclave the East Island proposal put forth. The authors wrote “we felt that the uniqueness of this island was, of course, its very insularity—the romance of an island, combined with the excitement of a vast metropolis just a few hundred feet away.” The plan hypothesized that the island’s isolation would allay the fears of the white middle class, which was concerned about the presence of poor minorities in inner-city neighborhoods. The plan did not specify which buildings would be devoted to each income group, implying that either each group’s building would provide similar amenities, or that, less realistically, people of different incomes would live side-by-side in neighboring apartments.\textsuperscript{42}

Pedestrians were prioritized in the plan; automobiles would be relegated to the “Motorgate” parking garage, connected directly to Queens via bridge. The center of activity would be the subway station, from which individuals living on the island would commute to jobs in Manhattan. The architects envisioned it as the hub of commerce, entertainment, and education.\textsuperscript{43} Along with providing people of different incomes housing of similar quality in close proximity, the community’s design facilitated quotidian interaction. The isolating features of suburban postwar upper-middle-class existence that allowed people to escape their less wealthy peers—the automobile commute, expensive shopping centers, and elite public schools—ironically would not be provided on this island. What Johnson and Burgee were proposing was an untested prototype for class integration.

The development needed financial backing from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, which would help subsidize the public housing and Section 236 moderate-income elements of the project. President Richard Nixon’s HUD Secretary George Romney stated that his primary goal was to provide comfortable housing near jobs for all Americans; Welfare Island fit that objective well. Even so, the economic integration that was the hallmark of the island’s plan was not a top priority for the secretary, who was at the time encouraging the movement of poor blacks to job-filled suburbs and a corresponding migration of affluent whites back into the city.\textsuperscript{44} Welfare Island’s clear objective was to keep people of all types in town; would HUD fund a project with that mission?

To make matters worse, HUD’s funding formulas were not sufficiently generous for New York City. Contractors wanted more money per project than the federal government had agreed to finance; the per-room construction cost limit imposed by HUD was $3,150, but the lowest bid for a typical late 1960s public housing project to be built in the Lower East Side, for example, was $4,200. As a result, in December 1969, city housing officials announced that federal aid for low- and moderate-income housing had simply come to a halt. Construction costs on Welfare Island would be lower than elsewhere because the buildings were to be built on city-owned rather than acquired land. But unless Washington increased allocations, even the cash-rich UDC would have trouble avoiding a cancellation of the project.\textsuperscript{45}
HUD’s New Community Development Corporation (NCDC), which was formed as a result of the inclusion of Title VII in the 1968 Housing Act, could serve as a useful connection between New York’s projects and the nation’s development goals. The NCDC would select new towns for grant and loan financing based on a number of criteria, including the creation of “orderly urban growth” through sprawl prevention and the revitalization of city centers. In addition, the federal government specifically laid out guidelines that required new communities to include housing “for people of all incomes, ages and family composition, including a substantial amount for people of low and moderate income,” according to HUD memos.46

Even with federal money, the practically bankrupt city was unable to take out loans to develop the island. But Lindsay wanted to retain control; the head of the city’s Housing and Development Administration “had a hell of a time persuading Lindsay to let the UDC do Welfare Island.” The mayor eventually relented, recognizing both his city’s financial limitations and the fact that time-consuming hearings could potentially destroy such a city project. He also came to see the island as a “bold step” because getting it done required cooperation between different levels of government. Lindsay agreed to lease the island to Logue, but only under the condition that the UDC would take on the construction of several low-income projects Lindsay wanted built (but could not afford) at Coney Island and in the South Bronx. Logue agreed to the deal, and Lindsay submitted the plan for consideration by the New York City Board of Estimate, which at the time was empowered to make the city’s major land-use decisions.47

Opposition to the plan formed quickly, focusing on the UDC’s power to ignore local decision making. An editor at The Village Voice argued that the UDC was using the sale of bonds designated for Welfare Island to finance projects elsewhere: “using this enormously valuable piece of real estate as the core, the UDC can actually build all over the state.” Ada Louise Huxtable, architecture reviewer for The New York Times, wrote that the UDC “could plunge the city right back into the Bulldozer Age” of Robert Moses, threatening a repetition of the painful dislocations caused by earlier urban renewal. Congressman Ed Koch and City Councilman Carter Burden joined them, questioning whether the UDC was the right agency to develop the island and wondering whether the lease made it possible for the UDC to circumvent the Johnson-Burgee plan and make what had been designed as a mixed-income community simply a haven for the wealthy.48

Nonetheless, on October 29, 1969, the Board of Estimate—whose members included the mayor and the presidents of the city’s five boroughs, the city comptroller, and the city council president—approved the deal; on December 23, the island was officially leased to the Welfare Island Development Corporation (WIDC), a UDC subsidiary, for ninety-nine years. The agreement was definitively mixed-income; it would offer five thousand units of housing: 20 percent public housing, 10 percent elderly public housing, 25 percent Section 236 moderate-income housing, 20 percent Article 2 (state Mitchell-Lama) middle-income housing, and 25 percent conventionally financed (luxury) housing. The UDC would also be responsible for the construction of 200,000 ft² of office space and 100,000 ft² of retail as well as schools, a library, two swimming pools, a fire station, a police station, and a 2,500-car garage. To placate the lease’s opponents, many of whom argued that the city was losing control, the WIDC’s eighteen-member board of directors would include significant municipal representation. Eight members would be city administrators, three would be UDC representatives, and seven would be citizens, nominated by the UDC president.49

Welfare Island would be the one of the first postwar government-sponsored new towns and the first urban new community to emphasize the mixing of people on both racial and economic grounds. The project, however, was fraught with danger. President Nixon supported equal opportunity laws in housing based on race, but he argued that “there is nothing in existing law that authorizes, much less mandates, the imposition of low- and moderate-income housing on affluent
communities.” According to an article in The Washington Post, the project was even questioned by some HUD staff members who doubted that many well-off people would be “willing to live in the same community with poor people, [even] provided the community offers them outstanding housing, complete community facilities and excellent schools.”50

Indeed, internal documents at HUD demonstrate that the agency was skeptical of the income mix proposed for the island, even though the new communities program was premised on the idea of creating mixed-income neighborhoods. A scoping report providing clearance for the NCDC to consider funding UDC’s project stated that HUD’s “staff question the sponsor’s ability to achieve this marketing program with regard to the 25% upper-income families.” The agency was unconvinced that rich New Yorkers would choose to inhabit an island with so many members of the lower class. At one point, the NCDC Board even considered telling UDC President Logue that it would only commit to 25 percent low- and moderate-income housing, far below the 55 percent planned for Welfare Island, though that message was never passed on. Federal staffers were also concerned about the willingness of the upper class to live in an environment without easy access to automobiles—ignoring the fact hundreds of thousands of wealthy people did just that in Manhattan’s Upper East Side. Logue later defended his stance in favor of the planned housing balance and community design in a letter to HUD, writing that he had no concerns about the project’s viability.51 But it was clear that the Nixon Administration would not step up to bat for this project’s advancement.

Because of HUD rules about the use of its funds, the UDC would have to separate the buildings by financing type. Was the mixed-income goal worth the required effort? And would the UDC be able to fund the affordable housing at all, with limited support from HUD? Stephen Lefkowitz, then UDC chief counsel, said that Logue was pressured “to start with just market rate housing.” because of an assumption that the island would simply turn into another failed public housing project if the poor were allowed on the island first. Logue, however, maintained his vision and pushed the UDC to prioritize low- and moderate-income housing. Theodore Liebman, the UDC’s Chief of Architecture, said Logue insisted “this is going to go from beginning to end a total mix.” If the rich came first, they would “never permit low-income people to come on that island.”52 And though people of different classes would not be living literally side-by-side because of the HUD regulations, Logue understood that the high-density, pedestrian-friendly nature of the development encouraged integration on the street, and he pushed forward. His insistence that the low-income housing be built in the first phase was essential in producing today’s mixed-income Roosevelt Island, rather than a high-income enclave.

In 1970, the UDC should have broken ground. Logue wanted to demonstrate that he cared about high-quality architecture and deliberately avoided building yet another group of brick high-rises. The organization hired several well-known architects to put the Johnson-Burgee plan into stone.53 The firm of Sert, Jackson & Associates designed Eastwood, an apartment complex of connected U-shaped buildings for low- (four hundred units) and moderate-income (six hundred units) individuals. Families earning as little as $6,100 a year would be provided homes looking out onto Queens. Though the construction quality of the building itself was comparable to the others built on the island for more wealthy individuals, the view was not; Logue sacrificed the perspectives of the poor for those of the rich, who would be facing Manhattan. Like many public housing buildings, Eastwood was a skip-stop project, saving construction costs by providing elevator stops only every third floor. Unlike other buildings, though, all apartment entryways were located on the floors with elevator stops; private stairwells led to apartments on the floors above and below. This increased inhabitable space and also meant a higher density of doorways in each corridor, multiplying the number of proverbial “eyes on the street” and avoiding the empty corridors characteristic of failed housing projects like Pruitt-Igoe.54 Westview, another building designed by the Sert firm, was a 371-unit market-rate rental complex. Its inhabitants would
be getting luxurious accommodations and views of the Upper East Side. Luxury aside, in comparing Westview and Eastwood, several architectural critics argued that the building for the poor was in fact of a better design.55

The Johansen & Bhavnani firm designed the Rivercross building, a Mitchell-Lama-funded project that would provide housing—377 units in total—for families making more than $27,000 a year. The firm’s second building, the four hundred-unit Island House, was also a Mitchell-Lama project for upper-middle-income inhabitants. All four buildings would be grouped along Main Street, a tight and winding thoroughfare reserved for bus and taxi service alone, cutting north-south across the island. Along the street, in the base of the residential buildings, there would be shops, restaurants, and public facilities.56

A third architect was hired to design two other buildings with a total of one thousand units to complete Northtown, the all-residential neighborhood that included the other buildings mentioned earlier. On the other side of a park, Southtown would have been the project’s center, constructed above the subway station and including two thousand more housing units, retail stores, and 200,000 ft² of office space. This part of the island was heavily speculative because it assumed that arriving Manhattanites would provide enough business for the survival of the small mall there and lease offices in the attached towers. Residents of the island were expected to do much of their shopping there, though they would also be able to take advantage of the stores along Main Street, shown in Figure 2. Southtown and the two other Northtown buildings, however, were delayed because the UDC lacked the staff to manage the construction of all units simultaneously, so it would have to stage the building process. Confounding matters, in 1971, the Transit Authority announced that it would not be able to complete the island’s subway station until 1981 at the earliest, five years late. Southtown would not make sense without the transit component. As a result, the northernmost buildings were prioritized instead because of their proximity to the parking garage and the bridge to Queens. The decision to build Northtown first was a problematic one, though, because the vision of a self-reliant and full-featured community would be compromised if the retail, office, and town center components were delayed. Southtown was never built as planned.57

Though the buildings would have different architects, they shared a similar brutalist style characteristic of architecture from the early 1970s. They were not the “hanging gardens” initially proposed by Johnson and Burgee, and their concrete facades have not aged beautifully. Though retrospective critiques have found much to malign in the built forms of the period, focusing on their blandness and scarcity of windows, Welfare Island’s residential structures were cutting-edge to contemporary urbanists and architects. Their seeming uniformity also served to emphasize the importance of the Main Street, which Johnson and Burgee had placed at the center of their plans. This focus on the pedestrian-oriented street as the spine of the community led Johnson to argue that his Welfare Island plan was done during his “Jane Jacobs phase,”55 8 a comment with which Jacobs would probably not have concurred considering the uniformly huge scale of the island’s buildings. Yet the structures included street-level storefronts, a mix of uses, and access to parks, all of which Jacob would have promoted. Compared to other contemporary renewal projects, the island was far more humanist in form.

Welfare Island’s first phase would offer 2,148 units in four buildings at the island’s center by 1973, for a cost of $250 to $400 million. Like the other thousands of subsidized units going up in New York City at the time, the project relied on federal and state funding, but the fundamental difference here was the mixed-income element. If successful, the UDC would have proven that the public sector was as capable as private industry of producing dwellings for members of all economic classes. Planning the project from the forty-second floor of a skyscraper in midtown Manhattan, Logue was convinced that he could “get people of varying incomes and backgrounds to live in the same community and to send their children to the same schools.” He expressed few
Figure 2. Main Street on Roosevelt Island, 2008. Photograph by the author.

concerns that the UDC would fail to realize its aims. The City Council shared this enthusiasm about the island’s future and on July 19, 1973 changed its name to Franklin D. Roosevelt Island. A few months earlier, the UDC had commissioned architect Louis Kahn to design a memorial for the late president at the island’s south tip.59

Change in Heart

Without the will and determination of a Rockefeller in the State of New York to create a UDC, it won’t work. We note that when UDC went away, in its place arose something . . . having nothing to do with housing, having nothing to do with the many problems in the urban areas, but having everything to do with the free market.60 (Eugene Norman, former UDC project manager)
By 1970, even before construction began on Welfare Island, earlier warnings about the potential loss of housing funds were appearing increasingly prescient. Under the Nixon administration, allocations to federal programs were not expanding quickly enough to match inflation in material and labor costs. In a March New York Times op-ed, Charles J. Urstadt, State Commissioner of Housing and Community Renewal, bemoaned the city’s housing inventory: “The situation today is bleak and the future is even bleaker,” he wrote, specifically arguing that funding from the Section 236 program was too limited to meet “the dimensions of the demand,” even though the UDC had already managed to obtain two-thirds of the nation’s total allocations under Logue. By June 1971, there was a three-month lull in Mitchell-Lama starts, and the program itself, financed by both city and state bond issues, had reached its constitutional lending limit in the city. New York City Housing Authority President Al Walsh mentioned that the UDC might “have to arrange alternate financing” for the island, since even the state could now fund only housing “in the upper reaches of the middle-income range.” Two years later, City Housing Authority Chairman Simeon Golar warned Lindsay that private and government financing were increasingly difficult to secure. In a final coup de grâce, HUD chief Romney announced in January 1973 that the administration would place a moratorium on all housing subsidies. Romney subsequently left the cabinet. The outlook for public housing subsidies was gloomy, and the completion of projects like Roosevelt Island was in question.61

The UDC, however, had been prepared for a reduction in federal outlays. UDC Architecture Chief Liebman said “we suspected that was coming and tried to get as many projects in at the end of 1972 because we knew the winds were changing,” so the agency began construction on its projects around the state. Fortuitously, with the help of Rockefeller’s ties to the Nixon administration, HUD accepted the island into the New Communities program, which provided some aid for parks on the island and sped up the provision of federal housing grants. The UDC chose not to apply for full-out community funds for the project, relying principally on other federal sources instead, but the island nevertheless remained under NCDC’s supervision. Of the nearly two hundred inquiries received by HUD for new town funding, eleven other towns received Title VII money, including the failed Soul City in North Carolina and the successful Woodlands in Texas. Roosevelt Island and Cedar-Riverside, a project in Minneapolis, were the only government-funded new-towns-in-town.62

In 1973, Rockefeller vacated the governorship, claiming that “the ability to meet the needs of the people of the state of New York no longer [were] in primarily the hands of the state itself. It was in Washington.” New governor Malcolm Wilson found himself with anemic powers in a depressed economy: subsidizing housing was impossible even in Rockefeller’s powerful state. Rockefeller joined President Gerald Ford’s administration as vice president in December 1974.63 But the principal political force supporting the UDC could no longer demand state-level support, and his influence on the federal level was limited in an administration that had abandoned its former interest in expanding liberal programs. As governor, though, Rockefeller had done enough to get Roosevelt Island off the ground: he had given the UDC broad powers and a well-backed source of financing. His choice of Logue and the UDC’s negotiations with Mayor Lindsay had produced the desired effect: freeing the island for the state to develop it as it wished.

It was only later that the widespread fear that federal subsidies had permanently evaporated, an overall decline in the economy, and high levels of inflation eroded investor confidence in the UDC. By late 1974, the agency could attract no buyers for its construction bonds, eliminating its major funding source. In early 1975, Logue accused the bond market of destroying future UDC housing prospects; in retaliation, the banks demanded a suspension of construction in return for their continued investment. Logue responded, “We cannot allow basic public policy of this importance to be made in corporate board rooms and issued to public men by fiat,” and soon after submitted his resignation.64 Like Rockefeller, he was dismayed and rendered powerless by his loss of fiscal control, but Logue’s presence at the UDC lasted almost until opening day on the island.
According to a study of New York State under Rockefeller’s leadership, “had he remained governor, [UDC] default could have been avoided because of his contacts in the New York financial community” and his steadfast devotion to the agency.65 The governor’s support for this pet program ensured its continued strength while he was in office; once he left, it fell apart almost immediately. Indeed, soon after the 1974 election, new Democratic Governor Hugh Carey criticized the “fiscal irresponsibility and mismanagement” of the UDC. He adopted the bankers’ position and demanded a halt to UDC projects, following a study released by a Governor Wilson-appointed committee (whose membership tellingly included several former—and now probably distressed—UDC investors). State Controller Arthur Levitt attributed the UDC’s problems to the agency’s “moral obligation” bonding power; “the bonds [did] not require approval of the voters,” he said, “nor [was] there a binding legal requirement that [made] the state responsible for debt service.” The state had no actual obligation to back up the banks’ losses. As a result, an investment in the UDC required the banks to take a risky bet since the trickling of the federal funding stream and the departure of Rockefeller jeopardized its projects’ chances of success.66

Governor Carey aligned himself with the private sector. When choosing a new UDC chairman, he picked Richard Ravitch, a real estate developer.67 When the governor selected members of the agency’s board, he picked a real estate investor, a former city finance administrator, the former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the vice president of the Bowery Savings Bank.68 The UDC could no longer count on financing from the federal or state governments, but all that seemed to matter to Carey was ensuring that the UDC made money for its bond investors. That meant abandoning the redevelopment programs, like Roosevelt Island, that were “too uncertain of success,” as one analysis in The New York Times put it.69 Rockefeller and Logue’s dream had been abandoned to fiscal conservatism.

The city was supposed to have input in the UDC’s decisions, of course, because of the makeup of the island’s board of directors. But new mayor Abraham Beame, who replaced Lindsay on New Year’s 1974, inherited a full-fledged city financial crisis. New York still had too many debts, too many essential services, and too small a tax base. The banks, intending to recoup money lost on a defaulting city, pushed the municipality to reduce “unhealthy” social spending and ultimately convinced the state assembly to grant them control of the city’s finances under the Municipal Assistance Corporation. Mayor Beame had no energy or money to devote to Roosevelt Island’s completion.70

Out of desperation, the state eventually handed the UDC $88 million in grants and $140 million in guaranteed loans, hoping that the infusion of cash would save the projects then close to completion. Because the fear of bankruptcy was gone, investor confidence would be restored and the agency could pay back $104.5 million in bonds on which it had defaulted.71 In other words, the private investment relied upon to fund affordable housing projects was simply being reimbursed—with interest—by the state government. The UDC’s projects might have been more effective (and less costly) had the state simply paid upfront for its construction using traditional tax revenues rather than private investment bonds. Government was absorbing the risk as private industry—turning a blind eye to the public’s losses—took in the profit.72

Opening

Whatever his money troubles at UDC, Logue cares for excellence. He opted for a humane environment, for rich and poor, old and young. . . . Nowhere in America have we built anything like this place for a non-elite. 73 (Jane Holtz Kay, in The Nation)

Even with the fiscal turmoil at the now-bankrupt UDC, the departure of Governor Rockefeller and Mayor Lindsay, and the national economic downturn, Logue had been capable enough to
guide Roosevelt Island’s first stage of housing to completion. In early 1976, the four Northtown buildings, with 2,148 total units, welcomed their first inhabitants. The subway was far from opening; to get to Midtown via public transportation, the island’s first inhabitants rode city buses across the river to Queens, then across the river again to Manhattan, a one-hour journey at rush hour. The new parks were in disarray, more like unkempt fields than urban oases. But, as originally intended, the island was economically diverse. Monthly charges ranged from the $30 a room for the elderly living in the Eastwood building to $1,049 for the four-bedroom apartments in the Rivercross co-op.  

Some of the residents who moved into Rivercross feared that it would be difficult for islanders to interact across class boundaries. One new inhabitant wondered whether the building would become “another Sutton Place [on the Upper East Side], isolated from the rest of the island by its income.” But the island provided a welcome perception of safety for all, markedly different from the insecurity felt elsewhere in the city. Transportation became less of a problem when the city and state quickly assembled a $7 million aerial tramway to Manhattan, which opened in May. The five-minute ride to Second Avenue and Fifty-Ninth Street made the island a quick hop from Bloomingdale’s and provided the island’s residents a unique commuting experience.

Though the buildings were not themselves economically integrated, islanders shared public space. Four tiny elementary schools—distributed throughout the island and placed in each of the four residential buildings—were divided by level: by the fifth grade, every child had attended classes in each residential building. According to UDC Architecture Chief Liebman, this induced a sense of solidarity: “for the kids, it let them understand their whole community better” and “it got the families to participate in each building.” The separated schools were later replaced by the easier to manage K-8 P.S. 217 that operates out of a single building. The local library, gym, health center, and special music, arts, and home economics rooms, which remain, were shared by school students and local residents, committing them to the idea that the neighborhood and its services were to be open to everyone. Similarly, because cars were parked in the Motorgane, even the wealthiest inhabitants heading to Manhattan or Queens walked down Main Street toward either the aerial tramway or the garage. Additionally, the entire community was designed to be handicap-accessible to serve patients of the nearby hospitals. Even the buildings themselves opened up to the entire community, with public courtyards and inviting entryways.

Roosevelt Island’s success in meeting its goals of a socioeconomic mix was unambiguous. Virtually immediately, the island’s apartments acquired long waiting lists of both rich and poor. According to the 1980 census, the island was 14 percent black and 9 percent Hispanic. By 2000, the island was even more racially diverse, having become 27 percent black, 14 percent Hispanic, and 11 percent Asian. The economic mix had been preserved as well, with 17 percent of the population in poverty even as 23 percent of the households made more than $100,000; per capita incomes were $26,199. Most figures were quite similar to those of New York City as a whole, as shown in Figure 3.

The ability of the development to attract individuals of all economic classes proved that a mixed-income community whose demographics replicated those of the entire city would not automatically fail. In contrast to most class-segregated neighborhoods, the island was a place that could attract white upper-middle-class households willing to live, attend school, and shop along with poor minorities, and vice-versa. The public sector could build attractive housing for all; Rockefeller and Logue’s vision had been partially realized.

Nevertheless, the UDC, mired in financial problems, could not make Roosevelt Island the stand-alone “town” once envisioned. If built, Southtown would have become one of New York’s major shopping and financial centers, with direct subway access, offices, a hotel, thousands of housing units, and a mall; more importantly, it would have been the focus of life for islanders. But the UDC’s failure to complete the project meant that Roosevelt Island could never become a full new-town-in-town as originally envisioned by Lindsay and Perloff. Its residents would be
forever reliant on Manhattan and Queens for everything other than their basic needs, which could be met in the Main Street stores. As a mixed-income residential neighborhood, Roosevelt Island was unparalleled, but it never became a complete community where most inhabitants would shop, work, and play.
The difficulty of fulfilling that dream becomes apparent when the Roosevelt Island experience is compared with that of other new-towns-in-town. As the UDC focused on the island, City Hall and the state government pondered development in Lower Manhattan to take advantage of proximity to the business district. Battery Park City, a new town built on landfill amassed from the excavations of the World Trade Center next door, was initially proposed in the city’s 1966 Lower Manhattan Plan, while Governor Rockefeller separately proposed 7,500 state-built units of middle- and low-income housing there. Mayor Lindsay and Rockefeller made a deal in 1968, agreeing on twenty-one thousand apartments, two-thirds of them luxury and one-third middle- and low-income, the latter financed by the former and on-site commercial space, a more economically stable model than the subsidy-reliant Roosevelt Island.\(^7\) The goal of creating affordable housing would flounder if the office or housing markets cooled, but citing the extraordinary expense of creating new land in the Hudson River, the city argued that any low-income housing there would be a generous contribution to the city’s housing stock.

Not surprisingly, political opposition developed quickly. In 1969, Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton threatened to challenge Lindsay’s reelection bid unless two-thirds of units were devoted to moderate-income families. By August, Lindsay acquiesced, announcing that the housing units would be divided evenly between apartments for low-, middle-, and upper-income families. A mayoral aide claimed Lindsay now believed that “the social benefits to be gained from having an economically integrated community in lower Manhattan far outweighed” the resulting financial burden. At this point, though, concessions were irrelevant because construction could not begin until the landfill was completed in 1972 at the earliest. The state would be leading the development, anyway—so Lindsay’s decisions did not necessarily matter.\(^7\)

Frustrated with the state’s intrusion into the metropolis’ development, Lindsay and David Rockefeller, Chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank and the governor’s brother, introduced another massive development plan for downtown in April 1972. “Manhattan Landing,” also to be built on landfill, would include 9,500 luxury apartments, six million square feet of offices, a new New York Stock Exchange building, and a hotel. The $100 million plan, however, was neither economically nor politically realistic. The city did not need more office space, since the massive World Trade Center had just opened; likewise, federal housing subsidies were plummeting under Nixon, and if the city’s Housing Construction Fund financed the project, its entire reserves would have to be drained to pay for this upper-class enclave. The project’s competition with Battery Park City induced some to question whether the market was large enough to ensure profitability for both. Borough President Percy Sutton argued that “anyone having a choice would elect to live in Manhattan Landing rather than in Battery Park City . . . since rents [in the latter] would be higher and the housing in Battery Park City would be mixed.” In response, instead of encouraging the creation of a mixed-income community at Manhattan Landing, the Board of Estimate agreed to reduce the number of low-income units required in Battery Park City at the same meeting that it approved Manhattan Landing. This strategy was ineffective, however, and neither project was built as planned.\(^8\)

The project’s backers, having little luck finding funds, repeatedly changed their vision for Battery Park City. In 1973, they announced that the inhabitants would be all middle-income, but limits on state debt got in the way. In 1979, the state dropped its commitment to creating a diverse community and decided to channel profits from luxury housing there to low-income housing elsewhere. No alternatives in sight, Battery Park City became an upper-income enclave for Wall Street executives; some revenue from the project has been diverted to low-income projects in the Bronx.

The Battery Park City project was expanded in the intervening years and today includes thousands of housing units, millions of square feet of offices, a mall, and parks. But it is far from the diverse community initially promised—as of 2000, this section of Lower Manhattan
was 72 percent white and 18 percent Asian, with very few blacks or Hispanics. More than half of its households made more than $100,000 a year, making this an elite and homogenous setting compared to the rest of the city. Battery Park City’s failure to provide for class or racial integration exposes the numerous difficulties associated with attempts to create an economically integrated community. Real estate and financial pressures create significant hurdles for affordable housing in prime urban locations such as New York City. Indeed, the development of the diverse community on Roosevelt Island was realized only because of Logue’s far-reaching vision, political connections, and persistence. The ease with which Battery Park morphed from a mixed-income site to an affluent community shows that without constant political pressure and financial support for an economically mixed outcome, the status quo—a market-rate project—is almost inevitable.

In Minneapolis, the Cedar-Riverside project used similar funding mechanisms as Roosevelt Island and it was the only other new-town-in-town created with support from Title VII. As part of a renewal area near the University of Minnesota, 1,300 units in eleven towers were built, with a 10 percent low-income, 40 percent moderate-income, 30 percent middle-income, and 20 percent market-rate housing mix, commingled in the same buildings. According to Edward Lamont, director of HUD’s Title VII program, this project was “aimed directly at eliminating the socially stigmatizing practice of forcing low-income persons to live in an isolated setting.” But the program’s original scope of 12,500 units and millions of square feet of office space was never completed; instead of creating a mini-city, the towers simply became buildings in the city. Meanwhile, in recent years, the neighborhood suffered a dramatic decline in its “mix.” In 2000, the project was 51 percent black, 11 percent white, 23 percent Asian, and 8 percent Hispanic; almost half its inhabitants were in poverty. As shown in Figure 3, Minneapolis as a whole was 63 percent white and only 18 percent black, 6 percent Asian, and 8 percent Hispanic; only 17 percent of its total inhabitants were in poverty. Cedar-Riverside has increasingly become a home for poor minorities. This decline can be attributed in part to the site’s less valuable location. Because Minneapolis’ land values were so much lower than New York’s and immediate proximity to the Central Business District was not as important for automobile commuters, higher income people had more options for housing than in low-vacancy Gotham. The advantages of inhabiting this mixed-income community were not as pronounced as on Roosevelt Island.

Cedar-Riverside, however, was not alone in its failure to achieve the mixed-income goals the government had originally set out for it. None of the suburban new towns sponsored by HUD’s NCDC program were capable of meeting that criterion, either. According to the minutes of a NCDC board meeting in 1975, member Raymond Watson “reflected that the early expectations for the program were more ambitious than the program could realize” and “that the overall impression of the industry is that large scale real estate development projects are not feasible in the United States.” Later in the decade, HUD acquired a number of failed communities to preserve adequate subsidies for affordable housing; the projects that survived on their own, such as the Woodlands in Texas, jettisoned their original social goals and morphed into stereotypical suburban communities. Those failings, though, likely reflected Washington’s unwillingness to commit fully to the program, rather than some inherent problem in government-led development. After all, similar circumstances affected the private sphere as well. James Rouse, developer of Columbia, one of the major nongovernmental new communities, argued that this abandonment made government culpable for the failure of new towns in general; his own city had to relinquish hope for much of its ambitious program for class integration, which it could not realize successfully.

More recent development on Roosevelt Island, under the aegis of the state-run Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC), has been less focused on the mixed-income project. In 1989, five buildings were added west of the Motorgate, completing Northtown. This housing,
called Manhattan Park, set aside only 20 percent of its units to low-income families; the rest rented at market rates. The subway station finally opened that year, fifteen years late, providing far simpler access to Manhattan and Queens. On the north side of the island, a former asylum for the mentally ill was renovated and expanded into The Octagon, a super-luxury apartment complex. After the development corporation promised two thousand new units with a 50/50 split between subsidized and market units in a newly designed Southtown, it succumbed to financial realities and leased the land to a private entity to develop the Riverwalk complex with nine buildings and just a small percentage of middle- and low-income units. Recent efforts by building management companies on the island to transition moderate- and low-income housing in the Eastwood building to market-rate rentals could erode that diversity even more. Unlike the mall and office complex of the originally planned Southtown, the Riverwalk buildings will include a few retail outlets but little else, meaning that the island will remain mostly a bedroom community for people with Manhattan jobs, rather than a destination in and of itself. The new buildings—more traditional in design than UDC’s structures and oriented physically away from the Main Street corridor—lack the diversity of the original development and erode the uniqueness of the community.

Yet even if the motives behind the island’s new development lack some of the idealism of the original construction, the relatively small population has developed a strong and functional neighborhood. Though limited in scope and beset at times with vacant storefronts, Main Street offers the island’s ten thousand residents a grocery, a convenience mart, several restaurants, a coffee shop, and a hardware store. Local activists have made their opinions clear via RIQC; recently, their opposition significantly delayed the construction of the memorial to Franklin Roosevelt planned for the southern tip of the island, though it is now being built. In addition, the island hosts an historical society, a residents’ association, several local blogs, and a volunteer newspaper called The Wire that has been delivered biweekly to every apartment doorstep since 1981.

Though Roosevelt Island has realized its goals of mixed housing, it is difficult to measure the success of the development in promoting social integration in daily life, one of the stated hopes of Logue and Johnson. Main Street stores are rudimentary, more likely to appeal to poorer inhabitants than the wealthy, who can find higher quality enterprises across the river. Day-to-day street interactions do not ensure the growth of strong, personal relationships. The island has cultivated a strong sense of community for some of its most involved residents, but it would be hard to prove that most inhabitants share that feeling. In other words, the island offers no panacea for all social problems even as it demonstrates the effectiveness of government action in realizing some of the measurable goals of the original plan.

Conclusions

Ed Logue was the man who wanted to do it. He did everything that you see there. Logue really had a force of will. (Alexander Garvin, architect)

Roosevelt Island’s successes in achieving its mixed-income housing goals, which seem possible only in the context of the unique political and economic conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, required cooperation among all three levels of the federal system. City government could not have completed the project alone even after it formed the Welfare Island Development Committee in 1968 because it lacked adequate finances for a thousand subsidized units. More fiscally sound state and federal governments, however, could not work independently because the land was city owned. But Lindsay’s willingness to compromise his power in relinquishing
the island to the UDC in 1969, so different from previous Mayor Wagner’s indifference about development on the island, allowed the project to proceed. And federal public housing support, Section 236 loans, and state Mitchell-Lama dollars made the project financially feasible.

Rockefeller’s intense push for the UDC and his innovative use of moral obligation bonds made Roosevelt Island possible in spite of the fact that neither the city nor state could legally increase their debt loads. Logue’s steadfast devotion to the mixed-income vision ensured that the island would not be abandoned to the financial imperative. Logue’s power was enhanced by the UDC’s insulation from party politics, strong support from elected leadership, and its leader’s large powers of discretion in project decision making. As Lindsay administration official David McGregor put it, Logue “was clearly the lead dog in the hunt and he also knew exactly what he wanted to do . . . and he did it well.” The Nixon administration’s decision to cut off funds showed, however, that the UDC needed support from higher levels of government to be effective. And though Rockefeller’s support may have kept the agency alive, the hostile attitudes of Governors Wilson and Carey toward the UDC inspired a loss in confidence in the financial community and led to the ultimate failure to complete the island project as originally planned.89

Roosevelt Island’s development by the UDC required resolute action at all three levels of government, but the site itself, with its accessibility to Manhattan and history of neglect, facilitated project completion. In contrast, the close proximity of Battery Park City to Wall Street and its construction on new land unleashed financial pressures that precluded its development as a mixed-income project; the lack of progressive entrepreneurial leadership and a loss of federal funding contributed mightily in this regard. As a result, Battery Park City is now a high-income enclave. Cedar-Riverside’s example demonstrates the enormous value of Roosevelt Island’s relative proximity to Midtown and its ability to attract members of the middle and upper classes; the former’s less advantageous location has turned it into a low-income ghetto.

In the 1990s, the HUD-sponsored HOPE VI program began redeveloping aging public housing complexes as mixed-income communities, with the goal of reducing entrenched poverty, crime, and other social pathologies. Though neighborhood reconstruction has typically resulted in an overall loss of low-income housing units and has included a heavy private involvement in the market-rate sector, the program may suggest nonetheless that today’s public sector can be adept in creating mixed communities.90 Yet HOPE VI remains primarily a hands-off program, with limited state and federal involvement; most decisions have been left to community organizations and even some profit-motivated developers. Roosevelt Island demonstrates that the public sector can be a successful primary player in producing communities—from public housing to upper-middle-class apartments—but its example has thus far not been replicated.

As former UDC counsel Paul Byard said, “the whole point of Roosevelt Island is that it’s an extraordinary example of the huge turn in American social policy. We were the last significant public program that was effective.”91 The abandonment of the liberal project in recent decades puts into question whether similar projects will ever again be built. Given adequate resources and political support, governments in the 1960s were able to engage in effective redistributive policy by constructing housing on Roosevelt Island, using a physical intervention to improve the city for members of all classes. The island’s success—in direct opposition to the pervading impression of governmental failure in urban development schemes—demonstrates the potential power of an entrepreneurial public sector in creating diverse and appealing neighborhoods.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Professors Cynthia Horan and Dolores Hayden for their help in the completion of this article.
Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: Completion of this article was generously supported by a Mellon Fellowship from Yale University.

Notes

25. Connery and Benjamin, Rockefeller of New York, 130.
31. Underwood and Daniels, Governor Rockefeller in New York, 121, 137.
32. Nat Leventhal, “Memo on New Housing on East River Drive, to John Lindsay” (with Lindsay handwriting on it), May 6, 1971, Yale University Manuscripts and Archives, John Lindsay Papers (YJL), Accession N. 98-M-094, Box 5, Folder 81-Housing Authority, ’69-’73.


41. Johnson and Burgee, The Island No One Knows, 7, 9, 15.

42. Before he was appointed head planner, Philip Johnson recommended I. M. Pei, who had worked on Logue’s Boston Government Center, for the job. Pei wanted the island to be an extension of Manhattan’s Upper East Side, and proposed connecting the neighborhoods with two bridges. The architect wanted “to really make it a swinging part of the city rather than a suburb.” (Richard Rogn, “New Town on a New York Island,” City, May, 1971.) Johnson and Burgee, The Island No One Knows, 9, 15, 20.

43. Johnson and Burgee, The Island No One Knows, 17.


54. The infamous Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis, which was demolished after complete social disintegration 1972, was also stop-go. But Pruitt-Igoe forced residents to climb dangerously empty and dark public stairs to make it to the floors without an elevator stop. The low-density of doors on that project, as in many others, made the hallways also often feel dangerously empty. (Alexander von Hoffman, “Why They Built the Pruitt-Igoe Project,” *Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University*. Available at http://www.soc.iastate.edu/sapp/PruittIgoe.html.)


56. The inhabitants of Rivercross were upper-middle-class. The fact that the UDC needed a subsidy to construct a building for these inhabitants says a lot about the state of New York real estate at the beginning of the 1970s. (Alan S. Oser, “A Profile of First Roosevelt Island Settlers,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1976.)

57. Bailey, “Manhattan’s Other Island,” 304.


62. “New Communities Program,” NCDC. USA, RG 207, Stack 130, Row 3, Compartmen 45, Entry 133, Box 3, Folder-New Communities (Legislative and Legal) 2 of 2. The Model Cities program, which emphasized community involvement in the renewal process and increased provisions of locally based social services, frequently devolved into conflicts between community groups and city governments; its achievements were mixed at best. (Bernard Frieden and Marshall Kaplan, The Politics of Neglect: Urban Aid from Model Cities to Revenue Sharing. MIT Press: 1975.) Soul City was 1960s black activist Floyd McKissack’s vision for an interracial new industrial center in what was formerly farmland; ultimately only a dozen or so small buildings were built. The Woodlands was a successful exurban community that attracted commuters from nearby Houston. (Roger Biles, “The Rise and Fall of Soul City: Planning, Politics, and Race in Recent America,” Journal of Planning History, 4 2005). The UDC initially demanded money for parks, minibuses, and sanitation systems, but HUD declined, suggesting it would only sponsor housing. Liebman interview. Bailey, “Manhattan’s Other Island,” 304. Rogen, “New Town on a New York Island,” 71. William C. Fucik, “The Challenge of Implementing Federally Assisted New Communities,” Public Administration Review 35 (May-June 1975): 252.

63. Underwood and Daniels, Governor Rockefeller in New York, 191.


65. During an election year, the governor pulled up all stops to push for the UDC’s “Nine Towns” Housing Project, which would have built low-income housing in several Westchester County suburbs. This incited intense local criticism from the area’s wealthy inhabitants. But Rockefeller claimed that “UDC was not really the problem; the difficulty was that young, low-income people could not obtain housing.” (Connery and Benjamin, Rockefeller of New York, 264-65.)


72. Even as it was being bailed out, the UDC sponsored an architectural competition for the second phase of Northtown. The winners, selected in April 1975, were saluted for their architectural achievements but were never awarded commissions. (Paul Goldberger, “4 Architects Win UDC Competition for Housing Designs for Roosevelt I,” The New York Times, April 29, 1975, 37.)


77. Alan Finder, “Roosevelt Island: A ‘Wonderful’ Experiment Still Building,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 1990, B4. New York City’s per capita earnings were $22,402 in 2000; 14 percent of its households made over $100,000 and 21 percent were in poverty. 27 percent of the population was black, 10 percent Asian, and 28 percent Hispanic (U.S. Census 2000, SF1 and SF3 Data). Seishiro Tomioka and Ellen Miller Tomioka, *Planned Unit Developments: Design and Regional Impact* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984), 83-4.


83. For comparison’s sake, the city of Minneapolis as a whole was only 18 percent black in 2000, and only 17 percent of its inhabitants suffered from poverty (U.S. Census 2000, SF1 and SF3 Data).

84. Garvin, *The American City*, 357.


89. David McGregor, interview with the author, April 23, 2008.


91. Byard interview.

**Bio**

Yonah Freemark is a student in the City Planning program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His research focuses on the role of politics in the development of mixed-income housing in France and the United States.