

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 19

c/o 201 E. 28th Street
New York 10016

Co-op City New York
or

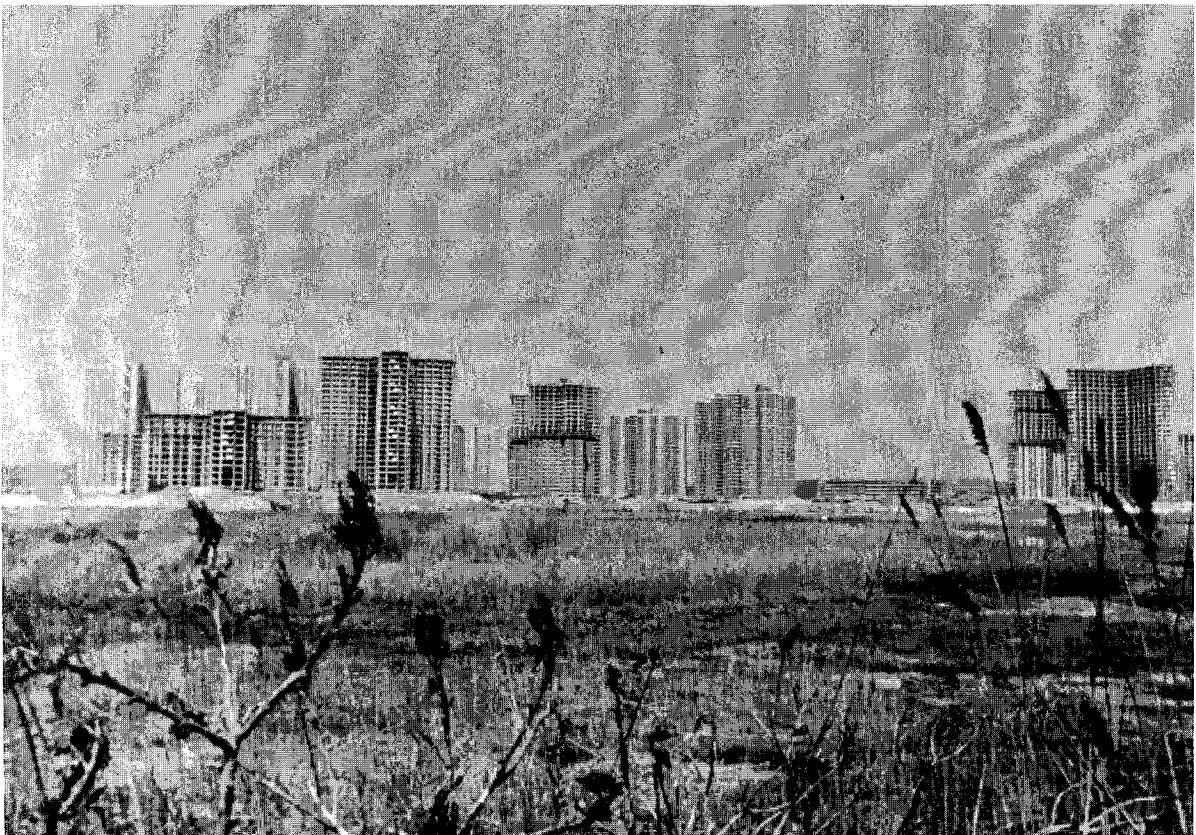
What would you do with
300 acres of swamp?

May 1969

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

A television repair man stepped out of the lobby of 900 Baychester Road, a stark unfinished high rise apartment building in the Bronx one recent noontime. He opened his tool kit, took out a tiny camera and started snapping pictures of the lunar landscape around him. Turning to a stranger he remarked vigorously "Five years and this place is really going to be SOMETHING."

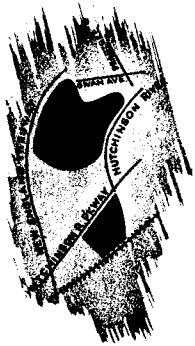


Rising from the now sandy banks of the Hutchinson River--Co-op City.

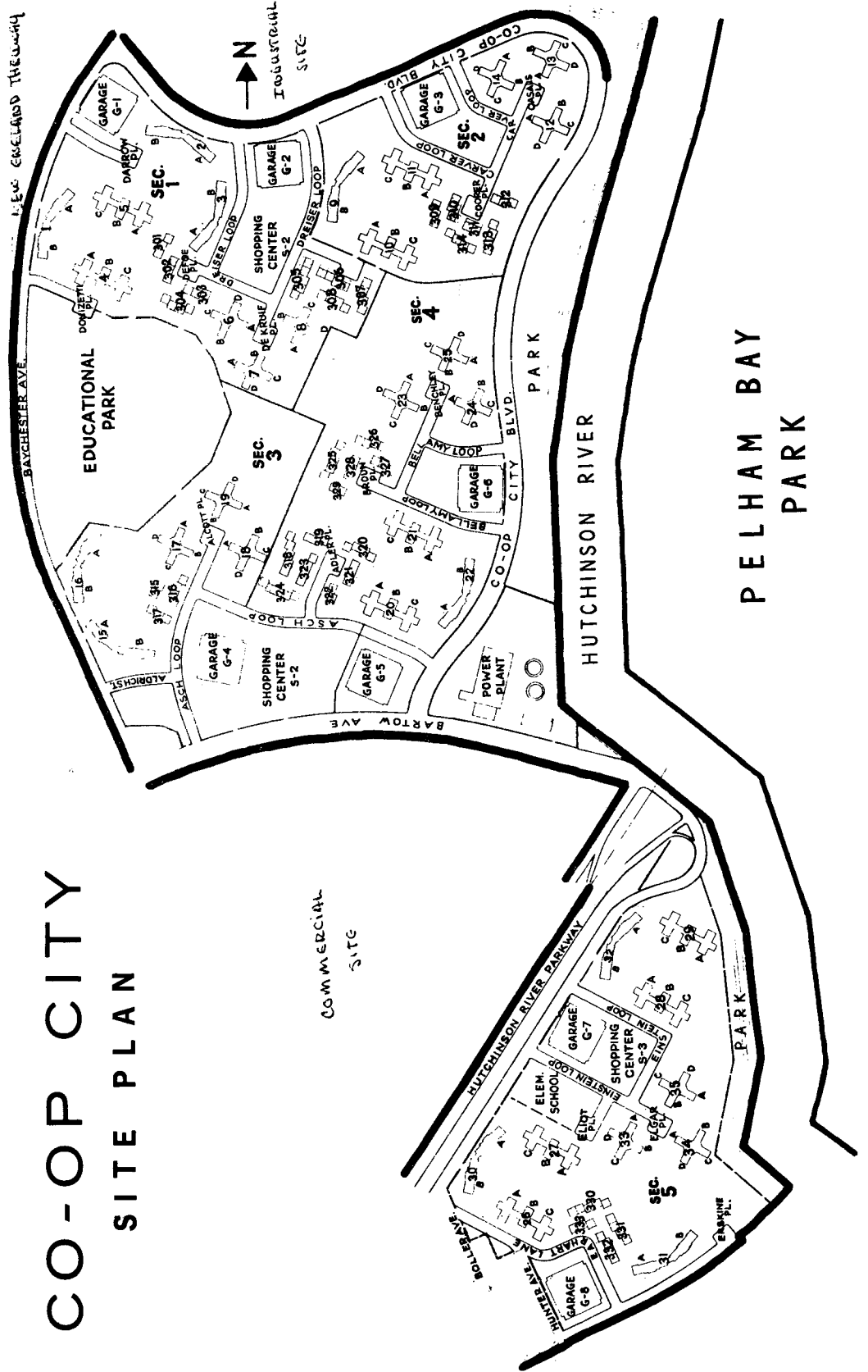
Co-op City is something already, but it's not a city, in fact it's not a new town. In bare terms it is the largest single apartment development in the United States and the largest cooperative development in the world. When it is finished it will have a population of 55,000 living in 15,382 apartments mostly in 35 high rise apartment towers on a site of 300 acres. If that is too many numbers to grasp at once think of it this way, Co-op City is the same as taking a nice sized prairie town, say, Rochester, Minnesota, squeezing its population vertically and sticking them all, men, women, and children, (but no pets) onto a plot of land about the same size as New York's Central Park from 59th Street to 72nd Street. When all the bills are in for Co-op City, and all its support facilities, the sum will gracefully, but inevitably, pass \$400,000,000. Four hundred million dollars. Wheeeeeeee. Yet despite the involvement of myriad governmental agencies and authorities as well as the requisite engineers and architects, Co-op City was not systematically planned. By chance it became possible. It happened on paper. The plans were modified slightly, and it is now taking place. Co-op City is that thing drivers pass as they enter New York from the north. Passersby view it with the same dispassion as the cowboy who ambled quite by accident to the edge of the Grand Canyon, looked down and down and remarked "Something must have happened here." Commuters who are watching the construction proceed are likely to mutter about how ugly, even surrealistic Co-op City is as it rises, plonk, from nothing in the middle of nowhere. Politicians may think Co-op City is ugly but they wouldn't dare say so in public. The reason is very simple and carries a relentless compelling logic. Middle class housing in New York City nowadays commonly costs up to \$45 per room per month. At Co-op City the carrying costs average \$25. Funny, how un-ugly that makes the whole project.

Co-op City happened because, inspired by the success of Disneyland, an amusement park called Freedomland was developed in the far swampy reaches of the Bronx in the late '50s by Webb and Knapp the real estate firm which subsequently went into spectacular bankruptcy. Freedomland, which also flopped, reverted to the National Development Corporation. In the spring of 1964 Robert Moses, the secular eminence of housing and nearly everything else in New York at that time including the World's Fair, realized the possibilities of that unlikely but large site for a housing development, and, by calling it to the attention of the United Housing Foundation, made the match.

UHF is a non-profit federation of unions (notably excepting the construction trades), and cooperatives, which builds cooperative housing for ordinary working people and sees to it, by damn, that they get their money's worth. UHF has a personality--gruff, though good guys, fighting on the side of the angels, and an impressive record. It began in the fifties doing urban renewal projects. By the time it was notified of the vacant swamp in the Bronx it was finishing the development of Rochdale Village, a large (5860 units) integrated project on vacant land in a formerly all black area of Queens.



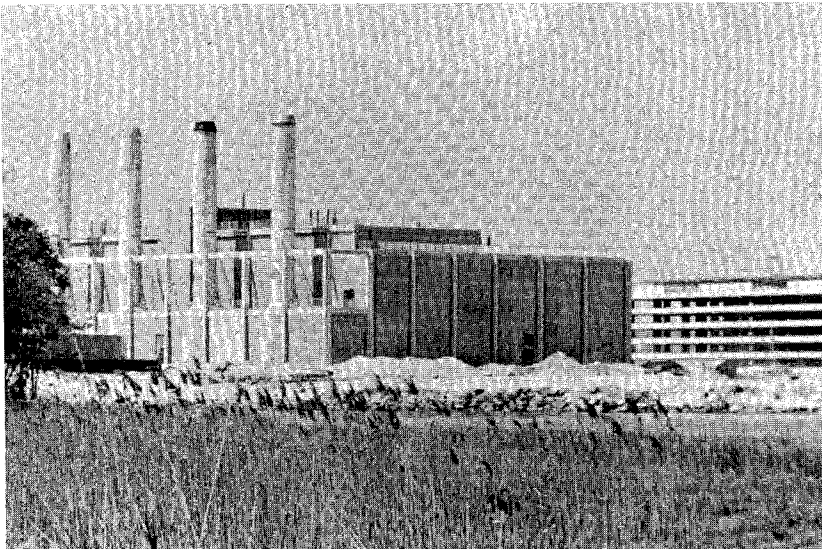
CO-OP CITY SITE PLAN



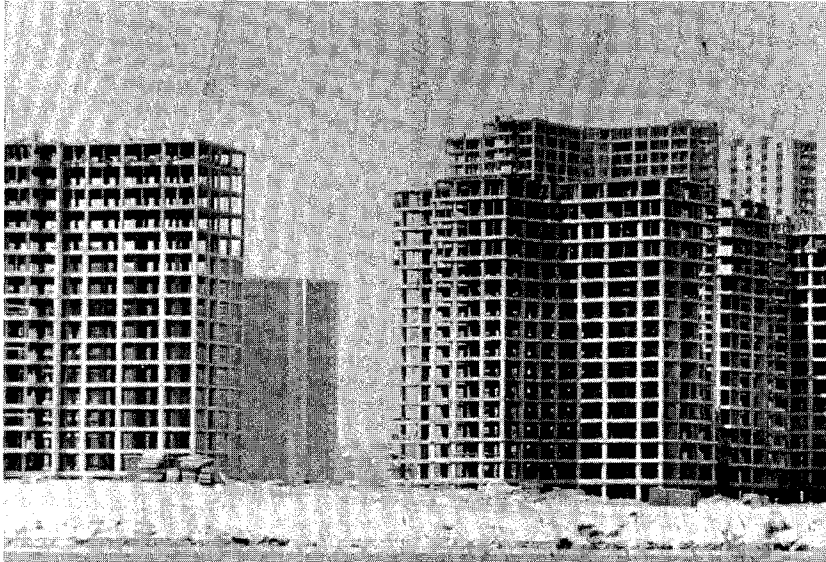
COMMERCIAL
SITE

PELHAM BAY
PARK

UHF housing is not particularly lovely to look at from outside, to which one might add, what new housing in New York City is? The value for price is largely interior, sound construction, good kitchens, hardwood floors. Philosophy is used to justify or explain away the exterior banality of UHF projects, because the aesthetes are constantly whining about appearance at public meetings and in the press. The aesthetes think UHF is boorish, UHF thinks the aesthetes are unrealistic and unreasonable to pick on non-profit housing while ignoring some of the hideous but profitable structures that erupt around New York. The UHF covers its blah colored brick flanks with the logic that if the city fathers and the public care so much for exteriors they should put their money where their mouths are and ante up public capital contribution for exterior design costs. They are well aware of the bitter irony, which taxes the best looking buildings in New York City, the Seagrams and CBS office buildings, for their loveliness. UHF is building for ordinary people with limited capital and they prefer to spend more inside where the residents, not the passersby will appreciate it. One example of the inner directed priorities of the UHF which is particularly attractive rhetorically, turns out, on examination, to be more of the gesture than an expense. Co-op City will be centrally air conditioned. UHF stresses this with considerable pride noting that families living in Co-op City will be living there all year round, won't have vacation homes or other luxurious ways of beating the Fun City summers. Actually the air conditioning system is an inexpensive addition to what is basically an economy of scale, its own total energy power plant and hard fought rates from Con Edison, the New York utility company. It is highly unlikely that air conditioning is a motivating detail in bringing families to Co-op City but it adds a touch of real class to a bargain price.

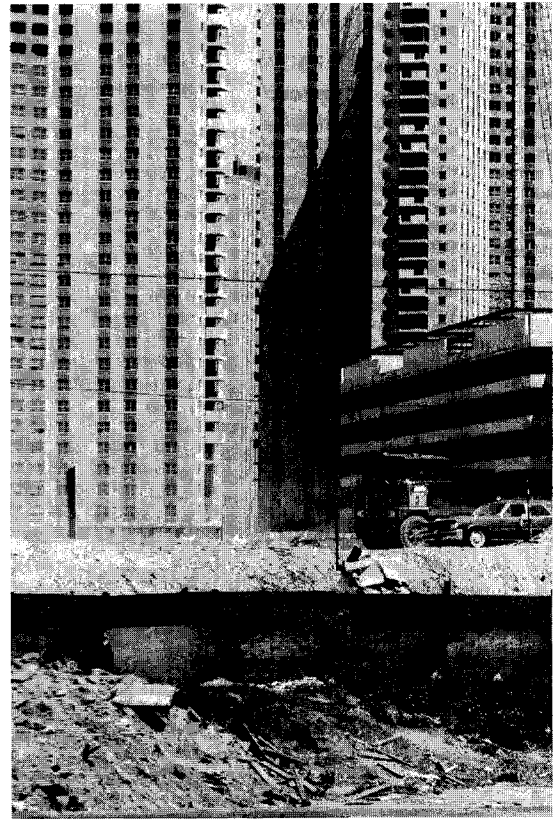
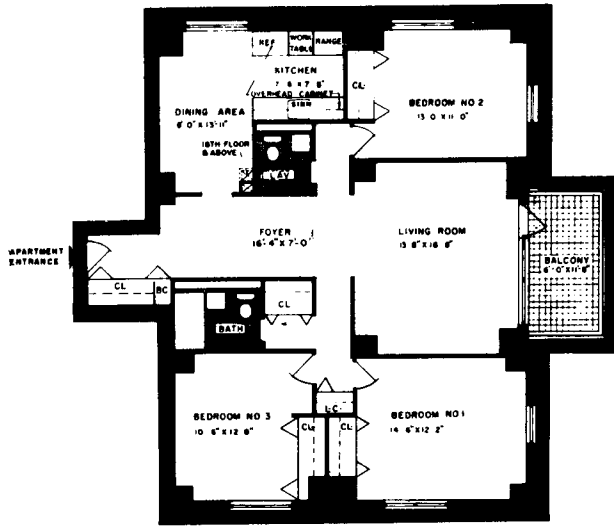


Co-op City is building its own power plant which cuts the cost of central air conditioning so that it is a practicality, not a luxury.

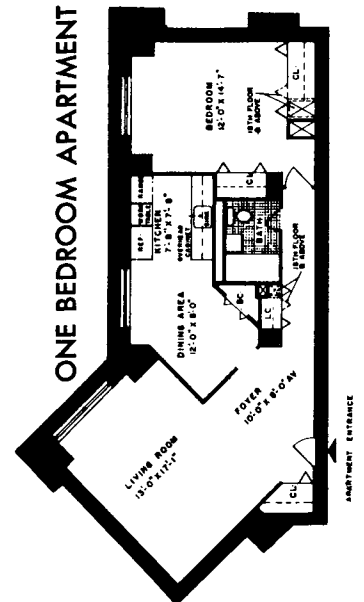


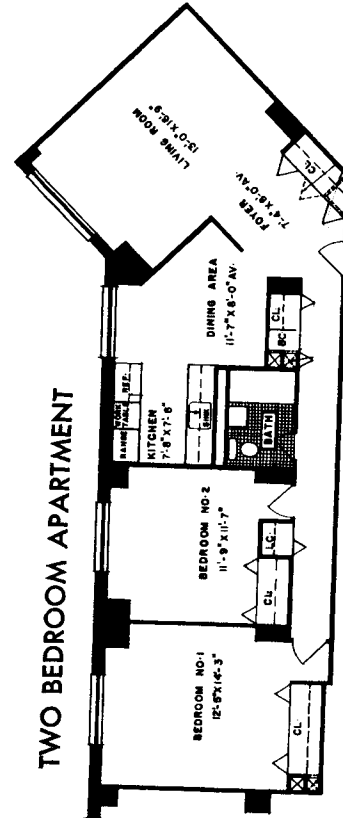
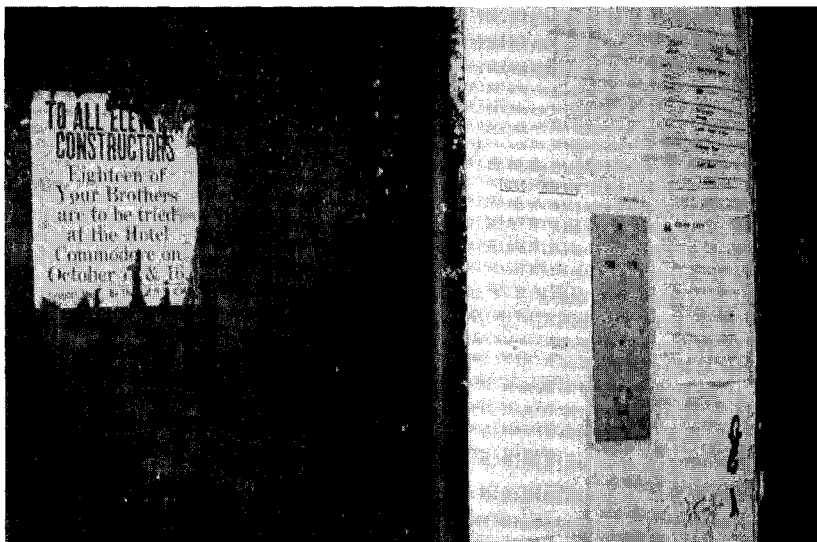
As far as the Bronx site was concerned UHF was very interested in it, but on the grand scale--15,500 apartments or bust. The land cost was, by New York standards, infinitesimal, even for a swamp. Land for the Milbank Frawley Urban Renewal Project in Harlem averages \$14.50 per square foot. The National Development Corporation agreed to sell 300 acres for just \$1.50 per square foot, reserving for itself two smaller, strategically located plots, one for commercial development, the other for an industrial park. It was a shrewd deal because, of course, the value of the reserved acreage would rise with every thin dime of UHF investment in Co-op City. Eventually UHF spent another dollar per foot for sand fill, five million yards of it, fine, white, and eight to ten feet deep all over the site, so the real land price was \$2.50 per square foot. With land cost so impressively low the next hurdle was financing and tax abatement. Months of backstage negotiations ensued, including a private audience with the Governor. In February of 1965 with a flourish and a press conference, Governor Rockefeller announced the imminent birth of Co-op City with its enormous state financed mortgage (\$261,000,000, the largest in the history of the New York Housing Finance Agency) and its 50% city tax abatement for 30 years. The response was immediate and underscored the importance of what the UHF is trying to do in the field of middle income housing. Within four days of the announcement UHF had filled 4,464 requests for applications. In three weeks 2,018 completed applications each with a \$500 deposit had been received. People who sent in their money were putting payments towards an escape hatch. They

THREE BEDROOM APARTMENT



ONE BEDROOM APARTMENT





had not seen even a floor plan, the UHF hadn't taken title to the land, the New York Planning Commission had not acted on the proposal, the site was still a swamp, it would be nearly five years before they could expect to move, yet, on the strength of the news story, the reputation of the UHF, but most of all on the quoted prices--\$450 equity per room, carrying costs \$25 a month, they wanted to buy a chance at living in Co-op City.

Before Co-op City could begin, the New York City Planning Commission had to review the proposals. Two issues dominated the Planning Commission hearings on Co-op City in April, 1965--design and transportation. The American Institute of Architects, the Municipal Art Society and the Metropolitan Committee on Planning and the Architects Renewal Committee in Harlem all took the time to go say that the Co-op City plans looked like one ugly mess. More importantly, they were joined by representative of the Community Planning Board No. 12, a representative of the Bronx Borough President's Office, and the Executive Director of the Citizen's Housing and Planning Council in worrying about the transportation problems posed by Co-op City's location squat between two major highways.

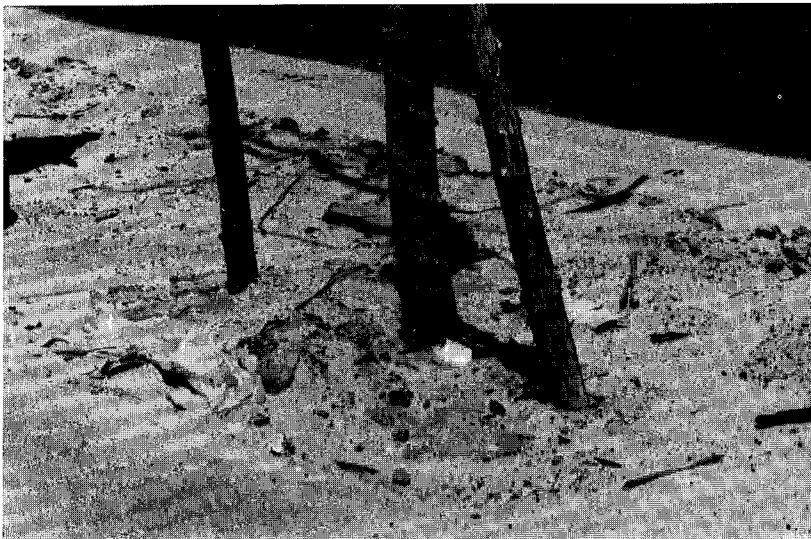
The Planning Commission forced certain "substantive" changes in the design of Co-op City. UHF considers any change which costs money to be substantive. The two most important were the creation of eight multi-level garages for just over 10,000 cars. . .UHF was going to allow nearly 70% of the ground space to be covered by parking lots with therefore both an aesthetic and a practical improvement. . . and the addition of almost 400 townhouses. The townhouses were added for aesthetic contrast with the 35 mighty towers, but will be reserved for particularly large families who need more than three bedrooms. (No one asked me but I think they will look imposed and silly.) For some reason upper middle class people who live and work in tightly packed high rise apartments in other parts of New York City (Manhattan) are distraught and offended when they see other people living in high rise buildings for other than the primitive reason of public housing. The important distinction is not between a ten and a thirty story building but between a six story building and anything higher. The difference is elevator living.

Most of the people moving to Co-op City now live in the central Bronx where as far and wide as the eye can see along the Grand Concourse, buildings are no more than six stories high. That means they will have to make some adjustments when they move into Co-op City towers. UHF tells oldsters about the back up generator to keep the elevators going in a blackout and one brusque UHF official tells apprehensive mammas, "The only difference between falling out a window at the 6th floor and one at the 35th floor is the time it takes to hit the ground." That by the way is a modern truth--which, friends, means rich bodies fall just as fast onto Park Avenue or E. 73rd Street, as poor bodies onto 125th Street, or middle class bodies onto Co-op City sand dunes. Whether any family, given the choice, would choose to raise children high in the sky, where mother can't look out the window and call her playing kids to break up the fight or come to dinner, rather than noticing ants on the pavement below, or spending her own time taking them to and from organized play areas, is another question. Generally the answer is that people prefer living in houses (which

means on the ground) and, with affluence, they try determinedly to move to houses. But in center cities, it is utterly futile to talk about idyllic houses and homes when more than 41,000 Old Law tenement buildings are still occupied, public housing is a dispiriting morass, middle class housing is too expensive for the middle class and, although there would be no lack of tenants, even luxury housing isn't an economic investment these days. In 1901 41,000 Old Law tenement buildings were declared unfit for human habitation. Those 250,000+ apartments are not just inhabited in 1969, they are mostly overcrowded. Housing costs in New York have reached a point where last year not one profit aimed cooperative was begun--let alone a non-profit cooperative like Co-op City. To get 15,500 apartments onto 300 acres with room for facilities, shops and parks, Co-op City had to be high.

Did it have to be ugly? Possibly. For the price, probably. But one can't help a secret suspicion that if it had turned out to be a beautiful design breakthrough the people for whom it was built might have been very suspicious of how their money was being spent. Anyway the Planning Commission got UHF to agree to varying the brick finishes for a hint of diversity, and a distinguished landscape architect's firm will do what it can when construction has ended. There will, the plans say, even be a marina along the Hutchinson River.

The basic social criticism of Co-op City is that it is a middle class development and therefore restrictive. Using classic formulas (rent being 20% of income) against the average carrying costs (\$25 per room) that means a family in a 3-room, one bedroom apartment should have an income of \$4,500, and a family with a two bedroom, 5-room apartment an income of \$8,700. In fact, the median income of Co-op City applicants is \$7,600, and the ceiling is close to \$16,000. Co-op City



A tree grows
in Co-op City.

Sitting in
the sun--somehow
it's just not like
Miami.



Co-op City with the Riverbay Cooperative is non-profit although equity is refundable. There is no bottom limit to membership and some financing is available to help families meet the equity payments which average \$450 per room. It works out that an apartment in Co-op City, not one with a balcony perhaps, and facing north maybe at a low floor, but brand new, hard wood floored, and air conditioned nonetheless, can cost less per month than upper limit public housing. The people moving to Co-op City are steam fitters, schoolteachers, shop clerks, policemen, druggists, hotel workers, grocers, college professors. They all just happen to fit into the middle class. In fact the high percentage of retired people with restricted incomes and pensions makes the income range seem even wider than it is counting only active wage earning families.

Co-op City is integrated. Applications (with deposit checks) from minority groups are running at just under 20% of the total, which has passed 13,500. Just who is in what minority group is a delicate question--a tally is not by direct notation but by "a close visual check by our people when they come in for interviews." The minority population at Co-op City are not taking those smaller apartments on lower floors facing north either, for the most part they are self conscious upwardly mobile younger people with families who want larger apartments with good exposures, balconies and status. UHF staff are defensive and testy about the whole subject--repeating again that it is an open project, that more people than think they can, could really afford to live in Co-op City, but how do you reach them, how do you

tell them? Co-op City doesn't advertise much outside of union papers, it doesn't have to because people putting down their cash today won't get an apartment till 1972, but if it did want to reach families at the lower end of the spectrum how could it be done? At the Planning Commission hearing Roger Starr, Executive Director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council and author of the under-read The Living End, backed into part of the really worrissome social problem of Co-op City. The final point, of his testimony in favor of approval, was raised in vague terms and cut with only one side of a sword which has two sides. He suggested that most of the people moving to Co-op City would be moving from existing standard or near standard dwellings. No one was forced out of anything on the Co-op City site, it was the last really big plot of vacant land in the Bronx, but moving 55,000 people onto the gooey banks of the Hutchinson River will have a suction effect somewhere behind them. Starr pondered the problem tentatively, four years later its truth has been established. Some 80% of the applications for Co-op City come from the Central Bronx, mostly the Grand Concourse area where whole buildings are emptying. UHF officials regretfully but bluntly acknowledge that the biggest factor in propelling people to Co-op City is fear. It's no secret that Blacks and Puerto Ricans will move into these vacated apartments and tension along the Grand Concourse will build if those buildings are simultaneously overcrowded and not maintained. Roger Starr wondered aloud if the apartments vacated by Co-op City cooperators couldn't be renovated, somehow conserved from overcrowding and the need-less physical decay. He was not questioning the backlash reasons moving families



Free bus service
is 20¢ saved
each way no matter
how upwardly mobile
you are.

out to Co-op City, rather he was wistfully challenging the inevitability of blight behind it. No one has answered, although, maybe, after the elections some university and some foundation will underwrite the collection of pertinent demographic information--who moved out, and who moved in.

The other side of the sword is that a high percentage of the people moving to Co-op City, the fearful ones, the tired ones, are old. To be mercenary they are not the people the city needs to keep, they are not the young get-setters who can pay the brutal taxes and survive the pressures of the city. They are the elderly who have lived so long in the city they are already, and will become still more, a burden to the city; they have expensive needs but they don't want to leave the city, the Bronx, all they have known at the end of their lifetimes. Co-op City for many is a perfect solution, a way of staying in New York and staying independent within modest incomes. They leave large older apartments for small, new, inexpensive ones. There are better than five thousand people (1800 families) living in the first buildings at Co-op City now 2,600 are over forty, 1800 of them are over fifty. They are the people who sat in the traffic islands of Broadway watching the traffic and the people and the children and commenting on the passing parade. I watched them on spring days in Co-op City sitting on their camp chairs in the sunshine on sand dunes full of cigarette butts and rusty nails, hands folded in their laps, nodding. If the UHF were not a cautious rental agent every one bedroom apartment in Co-op City (1/3 the total) would have been taken within the first two years of applications, all for the elderly, the retired and the retiring.

Rather than dwell on the plight of the elderly living in Co-op City one should, I suppose be thankful that they are living in mixed developments where there are children and will be young people and a variety of activities instead of retirement colonies--and there are a lot of activities at Co-op City already. But moving to Co-op City from a lifetime in the Central Bronx is undeniably difficult, and mostly it makes the transportation situation even more aggravating.

Getting into and out of Co-op City isn't easy and is going to get significantly worse before it gets any better. Yet everyone--UHF, the State, the City, all the speakers at the Planning Commission knew this was going to happen. All hail laissez faire! For the sake of one point, stop a minute and wonder what if . . .? What if Co-op City were a new suburb along the Swedish model like Faarsta and Vallingby outside Stockholm? It's a far fetched idea because, if nothing else, New York City seems hell bent on being unmanageable and all of Sweden on being overmanaged, but there are some relevant similarities, notably a serious housing shortage unrelated to war damage. Stockholm, like New York is overcrowded, and like New York, has an antiquated, inequitable and now seemingly irreplaceable system of rent controls affecting pre-war buildings. In Stockholm, as in New York, huge old center city apartments rent for fractions of the price of small suburban flats and little old ladies go on minding their cats in the big places while young families fall over themselves in small expensive cramped quarters they would dearly love to leave if only they could find someplace they could afford. Getting an apartment in central Stockholm is as difficult as finding one on the East Side of Manhattan only the process is openly called a black market.

Stockholm has grown into a map-type planners delight. It has a pretty, specific shape discernable from the air, perceivable as one passes through it on the ground, and purposeful in terms of resource use. Modern Stockholm is a star shape in which subway lines form the spokes of a star and connect separate, green-belted suburbs to the center city. Ebenezer Howard's book of gospel, Garden Cities for Tomorrow, hit Sweden immediately after its publication in Britain at the turn of the century and the Stockholm city fathers took it to heart. Stockholm by then had outgrown its medieval boundaries on a cluster of islands in Lake Maalaren and had developed in rather even outer circles of construction collectively referred to as the City of Stone. The wise officials of Stockholm observed their growth pattern, thought about Howard's theories of new towns and greenbelts, thought ahead, and started buying land outside the existing city boundaries. As a result of land control they were able to create a first ring of greenbelt in the twenties and thirties, but the real impetus to planned suburban development came during the Second World War when the gasoline shortage crippled transportation in neutral Sweden. Suddenly the subway system that had long been discussed and pondered and postponed seemed like a much better, indeed an essential idea. The decision was made to build as soon as the war ended, and work has progressed at the rate of about one stop a year. Instead of building a subway and building suburbs they were built together, to usefully complement each other. The suburb is planned around transportation. Within 250 yards of the stop are high rise apartments and shopping plazas, moving away from the stop are lower buildings and finally, but not more than five minutes walk away, there are a few single family homes at the edge of the greenbelt which separates one suburb from the next, a distance usually of about a mile. The first suburbs were rather small, the middle sized ones about the size of Co-op City and the latest quite large; there are variations in the pattern based primarily on site features, but in principle, if not detailed design they all take advantage of mass transportation. The connecting highways are engineered to California standards, and the Swedes, who now drive on the right side of the road, have nearly as many cars per capita as Americans, but as sustained, supervised matter of policy, public transportation is available, efficient and attractive for daily use.

There is an undeniable "will to chaos" in New York, part of the death wish maybe, but the sad saga of transportation at Co-op City is just another, albeit large, chapter in an oft told tale. There is the UHF doing a top priority task, building new housing for middle income people, the people who are fleeing New York as fast as they can, developing a vacant area within the city limits, increasing property values and hopefully, attracting new jobs. Their site, found by happenstance, not chosen by proud design, is between two main highways, rather awkwardly (and visibly) wedged between them. The state is putting up an enormous mortgage, the city is giving tax abatement and spending at least 70 million dollars on schools, water, sewers, police and fire departments, and interior roads, but do you think that Co-op City is going to be rationally connected to the rest of New York City? Keep laughing. As a motorcycle cop on the Hutchinson River Parkway said, "It may be interesting to you, but the way I see it Co-op City is just 55,000 people who're going to be using the two roads I patrol. . . ."

How can you get in and out of Co-op City? Let's start with the subway. There is a silly fiction around that someday the Pelham Bay Line might be extended to Co-op City. In addition to the fact that other parts of the city need subway improvement more, the design of the Co-op City, long and winding, effectively means that wherever a stop were placed it would be up to a mile and a half walk to Co-op City lobbies. What about existing subway stops? There are two, each about a mile from the edge of Co-op City, and accessible via a pedestrian overpass from the far side of Baychester Avenue over the New England Thruway. Breezy and inconvenient. So much for subways.

Buses? Co-op City applied for four franchises, three were granted, two private lines and one city bus line connecting with main subway and bus routes in the Bronx. In addition the enterprising First National City Bank is running a free shuttle to a large shopping development midday twice a week. Only the buses have to share the exit roads with cars, and trucks and more cars and more cars, and it is reasonable to expect that some 8,000 commuter cars will be inching their way out of and into Co-op City in rush hour traffic by the time construction ends. Do you seriously suspect that final plans for new ramps onto the existing highways are ready? Four full years after planning approval, three and one half years after construction began, and six months after the first residents moved in? Are you still laughing? I don't think it's too funny, and I don't even commute on those roads.

But wait. There's more to come. The National Development Company has yet to play its hand, so no one knows officially what will happen to those adjacent plots of land, but engineering models have been seen. Commercial facilities within Co-op City are restricted to three modest shopping centers. In the interim period a Co-op grocery store has opened in the basement of one of the garages. The groceries and pharmacies in Co-op City will all be cooperatives. A directory of the first shopping center indicates that it will include bakeries, eateries, service shops, religious centers, and basic clothing stores including a formal wear rental establishment. There are large shopping centers within a few miles inside and outside the city limits. It seems, however, as though the Baychester Plaza, in that tight vise between the highways will include four department stores, and two 30-story office buildings. Are you getting a traffic picture?

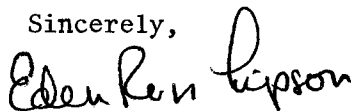
Would you believe that somehow in the middle of all this non-coordination the telephone company moved in, bought the site exactly where the New England Thruway exit ought logically to have gone, and built a 7 million dollar windowless exchange overlooking the thruway. Guess how long it will take to draw and get approval for new plans for a ramp that will detour around the telephone company? Guess, because there aren't any yet and roughly ten families a day move into Co-op City. Furthermore, because the Baychester Plaza and Industrial Park plans are unclear, but Co-op City is proceeding apace, the city has to go ahead with expenditures that will almost surely be inadequate by the time they are completed, specifically for sewers, and interior roads.

UHF is putting up capital of just over 30 million--all the rest is public money, and a lot of it is being wasted: wasted by bureaucratic bickering, wasted by non-planning, wasted by cost increasing delays, in other words, wasted needlessly.

I hope that you think this is inexcusable and outrageous--I do. But try to figure out who is responsible, it's the proverbial greased pig. UHF is probably the most responsible agency involved. The Governor and the Mayors (both Wagner and Lindsay) would like brownie points for their roles, but after approving they abstained from exerting administrative leadership or direction, although the city belatedly did appoint a Co-op City co-ordinator, who struggles along, trying to coordinate what isn't necessarily even related except by red tape. The Planning Commission report to the Mayor is an almost totally useless document and reflects the devastating aesthetes' misperception of Co-op City that has characterized posh press accounts as well.

Next time you drive north out of New York past the towers on the swamp, instead of genteely shuddering at how awful and absurd those towers look north of anywhere and south of Westchester, stop and wonder what might have been.

Sincerely,



Received in New York May 19, 1969.

Eden Ross Lipson



