

Next issue:
February 12-13

The Main Street WIRE

Roosevelt Island's Community Newspaper

in association with Website NYC10044



Patient Nel Scoville, Judith Berdy, and Therapy Dog, er, *Cat* Tatiana. Anusha Shrivastava

But can she bark?

Island Cat's Odd Role: Therapy Dog at Coler

by Anusha Shrivastava

Margaret G. has spent 13 years within the confines of Coler Hospital. A crime victim who was stabbed in Queens, she spends most of her day in bed, reading when she can. Her daughters visit off and on. These days, however, she looks forward to seeing another visitor – Tatiana, a 13-pound tortoise-shell Siamese cat.

The two-year-old cat is an official volunteer enrolled in the Bide-a-Wee Pet Therapy program. Judith Berdy, her owner, is the one who has to take her each week to the Hospital to meet with patients, but it is Tatiana who has to do most of the work, charming patients and acting the part of an interested playmate. “Look at how she licks my hairy arms,” exclaims Margaret. “Maybe she thinks I’m a cat, too.”

Tatiana may be suffering from an identity crisis of an altogether different sort, though. Her tag reads “Bide-a-Wee Pet Therapy Dog.” This is because she is only the the third cat to become a volunteer and does not yet have the clout to protest. Suffering the indignity of being called a dog, she accompanies the “Cat Lady,” as Judith is now called in the corridors of Coler.

“It all started on FDR Day on the Island,” says Judith, Tatiana’s official spokesperson. “I thought Tati could spread some cheer among the wheelchair-ridden patients and when she succeeded, a therapist suggested she become a volunteer. After a series of medical check-ups, Tati got the green light for the job.”

Riding in her carrier, Tatiana meets up to ten patients during each of her trips. Some patients, like Eleanor S., have Tatiana’s pictures up on their walls and say Tatiana reminds them of their own pets back home. Emmer Z., an Armenian, says Tatiana is just like her cat, Togu, whom she left behind in Romania. “There are happy animals just like there are happy people and Tatiana is a happy cat. I like her because she is clean and friendly,” says a smiling Emmer.

Helen B., a patient who believes she may be going home soon, keeps offering to buy Tatiana. “I’ll take good care of her,” she assures Judith, who smiles and pulls Tatiana closer to herself. For now, Helen and all other cat-lovers at Coler will have to make do with Tatiana’s weekly visits.



The Roosevelt Island PS/IS 217 School Band, under the direction of Dr. Richard Hartung, entertained the patients of Coler-Goldwater Hospital with holiday music at one of the Hospital's Holiday Tree Lightings held on the Goldwater campus.

Resident Leaders Asking Hard Questions About Public Safety

Four-Point Plan Emerges From Community Meeting

by Graham Cannon

additional reporting by Dick Lutz

Alarmed by indications of a steep rise in serious crime on Roosevelt Island and growing public concern over the Public Safety Department’s effectiveness, community leaders have been meeting on a series of initiatives designed to ensure the welfare and safety of Island residents.

The concern comes over reports of a series of increasingly violent crimes that include a shooting incident outside 2-4 River Road, a robbery attack on a Trellis deliveryman that resulted in a serious head wound, muggings, and vandalism, as well as a growing sense of lawlessness within residential buildings. “Every weekend you can smell the crack in the hallways,” says Byron Gaspard, who lives in Eastwood and chairs the Public Safety Committee of the Roosevelt Island Residents Association (RIRA). “There’s drug usage and drug sales on floors 4, 7, and 10. You can see clusters of kids smoking pot. My 10-year-old son saw a sexual act in the AVAC room.”

At an urgent meeting convened by RIRA Wednesday night, attended by Public Safety Director Jim Fry, the General Managers of Island buildings, and others, those attending discussed a four-point anti-crime package. Key elements include:

- establishing a Resident Review Board as a liaison between the community and Public Safety
- upgrading so-called “vertical patrols” in problem buildings
- permanent placement of one or more NYPD Officers from the Queens 114th Precinct on the Island, and
- an appeal to Governor Pataki for State Police help.

“We’re working together,” says Gaspard, who, along with other Island residents is also helping develop special youth activities, including crisis and intervention programs for the Island’s 15-22 year-olds.

The Chair of the Roosevelt Island Council of Organizations (RICO), Susan Whitaker, who was recently named to the Board of the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) as an observer along with RIRA President Patrick Stewart, called this week for consideration of a Review Board after the third burglary of the RICO office in Eastwood. “It is clear that some action is needed to bring about a greater impact on crime and the community should be more informed of these actions. One suggestion is the institution of a coalition of identified community leaders, businesses, religious organizations, schools youth, government, criminal justice, law enforcement and other appropriate community officers. The objective is to improve communication, crimefighting activity, and Public Safety accountability,” Whitaker told *The WIRE*.

The issue of Island crime was at the top of the agenda of RIRA’s monthly Common Council meeting last week, in response to an urgent plea from Gaspard to address what he argued are seriously deteriorating conditions in Eastwood. “I went to represent a kid at Queens Criminal Court,” he told the Council. “While we were waiting to see the judge, other Roosevelt Island kids were being brought in, in handcuffs.”

Council members were especially concerned at reports that Public Safety officers were ill-prepared and ill-equipped to handle systemic criminal activity and had minimal presence within buildings. Speakers contrasted the NYPD’s success at reducing the City’s endemic crime problems with the lack of modern, aggressive policing methods on Roosevelt Island.

“Public Safety officers have nowhere near the training of an NYPD cop, but increasingly they are expected to deal with big-city crime,” said RIRA President Stewart. He also pointed out that, historically, Public Safety’s mission has been clouded: “Part police officer, part social worker, with no clear definition of their role.”

Even as they try to get a handle on the problem, community leaders are frustrated by RIOC’s continuing refusal to provide criminal activity and arrest records despite a legal requirement to make the information publicly available. At the Wednesday night meeting, Fry said “the blotter,” traditionally an event-by-event listing of police activity, was available for the asking at RIOC offices. But on Thursday, personnel there could provide only a sheet of statistics containing information no later than November.

“Crime is the single most important issue on the Island,” says Stewart, “But it’s impossible to get accurate information on the problem. Getting hold of the most



Jim Fry

Who Pays for Public Safety?

You do. Half the funding is provided directly from RIOC’s budget. The remaining 50% is provided by the three housing corporations. Since the residents of Roosevelt Island provide 100% of RIOC’s budget and all of the housing companies revenues, you foot the entire bill. There is no City, State, or federal subsidy for Public Safety.

You also contribute to NYPD through your tax payments. However, we are underserved and underpatrolled by NYPD. When you call 911, your call is redirected to Public Safety in all but extreme emergencies.

Ron Schuppert

basic statistics requires submitting a monthly Freedom of Information Request to RIOC, which may or may not result in a portion of the relevant material being released.” Meanwhile, community leaders are urging residents to call 911 rather than Public Safety to report a crime or criminal activity. “That way you can be sure that the call is logged into the system and that, if necessary, NYPD officers will be dispatched to ensure residents get the protection they deserve,” said Stewart.

Resident Ron Vass, who until recently served on the Board of Directors of the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) and chaired its Public Safety Committee, says Director Fry is “as strong a man as we’ve had in

the position.” But, says Vass, “the system he’s running is antiquated, outdated, and basically inept for the current way of life we have on Roosevelt Island.”

Vass said that residential managers have looked at the contracts that provide funding for Public Safety with a view toward what might be done to improve resident security. Indeed, the contract under which a portion of Eastwood residents’ rent is funneled to RIOC to fund



Doryne Isley

Public Safety was the leverage used by Doryne Isley of Housing Management. Dissatisfied with in-building patrols, she switched payments to RIOC from a monthly cycle to annual. Housing Management now pays August 1 for the preceding year ending March 31. “There was a time I wasn’t getting internal patrols from Public Safety. That’s changed now. Lately I’ve been getting a lot more from Public Safety,” Isley says. She receives daily reports from Fry’s office.

Vass, who lives in Eastwood, says, “Eastwood residents simply do not get the bang for their buck,” adding, “It’s high time we recog-

See Safety, page 6

Pages of Thought and Opinion

Stick Around, Michael

I never met a basketball player I liked; they're all so tall and, when you're 5'3" as I am, that means a lot of looking up to. But I suspect I'd like Michael Jordan if I ever met him. I always have had the foremost respect for him as an athlete, probably one of the greatest ever.

Even more so, I have admired Michael as a role model for all youths, be they black or any color. I just hope that he will continue to make news of some kind, any kind, so future generations of kids will try to emulate him. I think he will, don't you?

Nice Timing

It seems appropriate that the next item I wanted to be certain to mention in this column is that February is Black History Month and there are a lot of plans being made for celebrating the occasion on Roosevelt Island. The focus of the events here occurs on February 27, according to Marilyn Engstler, Director of Community Relations for our housing companies.

The local Parent-Teachers Association and Roosevelt Island Senior Association (RISA) will sponsor an exhibition marking the month. The day-long activities at the Senior Center will be announced.

Rah for 1999

If you consider yourself of "a certain age," as they sometimes say, you'll be interested in this release from the United Nations. This year has been designated as the International Year of Older Persons, just in time to end the 20th Century and to celebrate the theme "toward a society for all ages."

That's fine with me for I marked my 70th birthday last week and, for a time, I thought I was the only one getting on in years. Welcome all of the rest of you. Now, the only thing we need to worry about is whether or not they'll get all those computer dates adjusted by the magic number 2000.



Choosing to Serve

My hope is that many of the Island's well-qualified residents will volunteer for the two new committees established by Commissioner Joseph Lynch to advise the RIOC Board of Directors on Strategic Planning, and on Capital Planning and Development.

More than 35 years ago, a wise person said: "If we are to encourage able men (persons) to enter public life, we may have to curb the self-indulgence, vanity, and the sadism which now operate to keep so many people out of it."

This is the month the community decided to get on Public Safety's case.

For *The WIRE's* part, I asked Jim Fry, Director of Public Safety, for an interview. He bounced it to RIOC, as he is apparently instructed to do these days by the information-tight Blue administration, and I had a phone message from a RIOC someone-or-other (she didn't pronounce her name clearly) asking that I call David Bailey to set it up. Bailey has apparently picked up the liaison functions that Mike Greason left behind when he fell into what is said to have been rather loud disfavor.

I had a lot of questions:

- True, I wondered, that Fry's right-hand man was canned for waving a firearm around on more than one occasion?
- What is the truth of the scooter-burning incident last summer? (Fry has said no Public Safety staffer was injured; an eyewitness says otherwise.)
- Can the community be informed about those shots fired at 2-4 River Road around 11 p.m. last Saturday night?
- What about that woman, touring Southpoint after passing through its open gate, who was manhandled, handcuffed, and detained by Public Safety officers, whose case was thrown out when her attorney demonstrated the grounds were not posted as claimed?
- What about the multiple break-ins and thefts at the Eastwood offices of the Roosevelt Island Council of Organizations? Are Public Safety's patrols so non-random that thieves can know just how to time such a bit?
- What about Byron Gaspard's claim that one is nearly as likely to see a drug deal in Eastwood as to see a Public Safety officer on vertical patrol?
- What about the rumors of Public Safety officers asleep in their cars at Lighthouse Park?
- For that matter (and to Public Safety's credit), what's the story on



Not to mention 1999, 1998, 1997...

Letters

To the Editor:

I was pleased to find Doryne Isley's letter under my door intimating that one or more residents of my building (Westview) may be guilty of stealing shopping carts.

I was pleased because this letter indicates that at least Ms. Isley, General Manager, inspected my building. I am somewhat confused, however, as to why her letter focused solely on shopping carts rather than the more important problems facing the occupants:

- Corridor carpeting that desperately needs replacement
- Elevators which constantly break down
- Entrance doors that require adjustments in order to be opened easily
- Problems with rodents and roaches
- Laundry rooms in need of repair
- Inoperative air conditioning unit in the lobby for most of last summer

Perhaps the next time Ms. Isley inspects our building, she will confine her communications with the residents to issues that will improve our living conditions.

Rochelle Liss

[Editor's note: The letter from Isley to residents follows:]

During my inspection of your buildings I discovered many stolen shopping carts being used and stored in your lobbies and basements for your convenience. These carts have been removed and returned to their proper owners.

Management recognizes a need for some type of cart to assist our residents when unloading cars and will replace them with appropriate carts in the future. Please refrain from bringing your stolen carts onto our premises.

Roosevelt Island Housing Management Corp. wishes all our residents a Happy and Safe New Year.

Doryne Isley

To the Editor:

In response to the letter from Ms. Liss, Management is more than aware of the items she has outlined in her letter and is constantly working for the betterment of the building, to repair these conditions. Perhaps Ms. Liss would like to attend the next Task Force meeting to hear first-hand my monthly report to the residents regarding their building conditions and planned projects.

Doryne Isley

To the Editor:

Has anyone missed this exquisite irony? Dr. Jerome Blue, who wants to build two 24-story towers and a convention center on Southpoint, to say nothing of running ferries from Queens and Manhattan, could not even take two inches of snow off the streets and sidewalks of the Island for three days in mid-January. This failure jeopardized the safety of the Island's senior citizens as well as those trying to get to work and back.

Richard C. Wade

To the Editor:

I had a friend named Kaye Ventura, with whom I lost touch. From information I received, she is married to an artist and lives on Roosevelt Island. I do not know her married name. I would like to be in touch with her.

Jean Firstencel
1913 Holiday Drive
Schenectady, NY 12304-2214

Letters Policy

The WIRE welcomes letters to the Editor, to the community, and to/from officials, and will consider publication on a *Name Withheld* basis, but the writer's name, address, and telephone number must be provided. **Preferred methods of submission:** IBM-compatible 3.5-inch floppy disk (any wordprocessing software) left at 531 Main Street for *The WIRE*; by ASCII text e-mail (72260.20@compuserve.com); or typed, double-spaced copy left at 531 Main Street or faxed to (212) 755-2540. Clearly handwritten letters will be considered. We cannot take dictation of letters by telephone. **All letters are subject to editing for length and clarity.**



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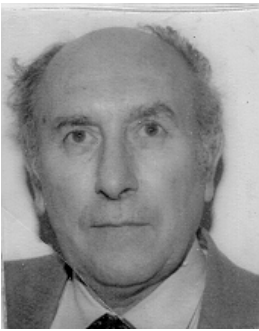
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John G. Mascioni

John G. Mascioni, a resident of Rivercross, died December 26. He is survived by his wife Esther, his two children, Michael and Marie, his sister Antoinette, and his two grandchildren, Adrienne and Danielle.

Born May 23, 1926, he was an avid student of the arts and engineering. He graduated from St. Lawrence University in 1949, received his BSCE in Engineering from the University of Minnesota in 1950, studied literature at Oxford University in England in 1951, and obtained a graduate degree in Architecture from the University of Florence in 1953. While living in Italy, he was captain of the professional basketball team from Bologna from 1952 to 1955.

Returning to the United States in 1955, he became a professor of architecture at Pratt Institute from 1956 to 1968. In the late 1960's, he founded Mascioni & Behrmann, an architectural and engineering firm in New York. Inspired by the works of Frank Lloyd Wright as well as



historic Italian structures, he designed and engineered commercial, medical, educational, and residential buildings in the US and Canada. He had a strong philosophical view of the role of an architect – the purpose of the structure and the human relationship with that structure was paramount to his design solution. His greatest joys were creating buildings designed for caring, educating, and supporting people, from schools to medical centers to the Roosevelt Island Chapel.

In the early 1980's, he saved the former Kips Bay Brewery building by forming the

Kips Bay Realty Group which purchased and preserved the historic structure, converting the interior into office space.

His family administers The John G. Mascioni Fund for Humanity to continue John's dedication to causes which concentrate on alleviating human suffering and assisting people in regaining the dignity they deserve. (For information: 908-273-8486.)



Gorman Leaves Island R.C. Parish

by Joan Christianson

Fr. Joseph P. Gorman, for 14 years the Pastor of St. Frances Cabrini Roman Catholic Parish on Roosevelt Island, has informed parishioners that he has left the Island permanently.

Fr. Joachim von Kerssenbrock has been assigned to the parish temporarily.

In a letter to members of his congregation, Gorman wrote, "As you all know, I had hip replacement [surgery] and soon after my recuperation I had an infection which caused a delay in my returning to my duties as a Pastor. Since then my health has not been completely restored and I realized (with the advice of my superiors) that a move would be beneficial.

"I have been your Pastor for over 14 years and I have tried to serve you well. Now it is time to move on. I have requested a medical leave and will not be returning to this Parish.

"I am grateful to all of you for the support and prayers on my behalf.

"God Bless you all and please keep me in your prayers."



Patrick Stewart

RIOC has a new slogan, "Better than ever!", which they are plastering all over everything from their newsletters to their web site. I fully expect to see it decorating new banners hanging from the lampposts. Presumably, they are trying to convince themselves, or perhaps Albany. It probably helps that they work in offices with no windows.

Before the holidays, their newsletter was crowing about a million dollar surplus that is in no way surprising, given that they have failed to address any of the maintenance issues that are their direct responsibility. The roads, the seawall, the grounds, the AVAC system, Motorgate, Good Shepherd, Blackwell House – all are suffering the same contemptuous neglect that the community itself suffers at the hands of RIOC management.

The current newsletter boasts of a "Tramway Surplus!!" (This month it's two exclamation points.) The newsletter claims that as of March 1998 (the end of the State fiscal year), there was a modest surplus of \$56,000.

This is particularly interesting since in the RIOC budget, also published in March of '98, they were anticipating a loss of more than \$770,000, and management was crying to the rooftops that something must be done to curtail Tram expense, preferably service. As head of the RIRA Transportation Committee, Al Weinstein spent the last months of his life struggling to prevent the cutbacks in service hours that RIOC feels are so necessary.

The same \$770,000 shortfall is projected for this fiscal year ending in March 1999.

Given that the operating costs have remained stable at roughly \$1,500,000 for some years now, it is hard to imagine why they feel that being off by some 1,300% in their projection is something to crow about. Especially when that projec-

tion was produced in the very same month that the final numbers were logically final and available.

Someone should tell them that rather than being evidence of the "fiscal restraint and responsibility" they are so determined to claim for themselves, this is instead demonstrable incompetence on a scale that's unusual even in government.

The problem is with all of this, of course, that none of these numbers can be believed: neither the \$56,000 surplus or the \$770,000 shortfall have any shred of credibility, nor any number in between. Nor do they seem to know the difference. We can only rely on the fact that the more numbers RIOC publicizes, the more public evidence they produce of their own incompetence. Now that the elections are over, hopefully someone will notice.

I searched in vain throughout the newsletter, looking everywhere for the expected announcement of RIOC's renewed application for the Metrocard for the Tram. Of course there was no such announcement. The Tramway is the only unsubsidized form of public transportation in the City of New York, where all other forms are subsidized to the level of 50-65%, and the Tram is the only MTA-fare transport not to offer the advantage of the Metrocard. D'Amato stretched it 200 miles, all the way out to the end of the Long Island Railroad, but RIOC can't stretch it 800 feet across half the East River.

I assume that putting so much effort into the snow job of their performance numbers, they were left with no energy to address their responsibility of removing the real snow that so hindered pedestrians, especially churchgoers last weekend. Like everything but their own PR, their responsibility was entirely neglected.

Better than ever, you say? It's not even better than never.



Even the Island's seagulls have had a time shaking off some of the recent cold weather.

PTA Seeking Computers, Software

The Parent-Teachers Association of PS/IS 217 is asking Island residents to donate surplus computers and software to the school.

Atlantic Records is donating a large number of older Macintosh and Windows computers to the school through an arrangement with Tom Chirgwin, the school's Library Media Specialist. The computers – somewhere between 60 and 100 in total – are being reprogrammed and deployed into the classrooms. One is already being used by 8th-grade students to produced the school yearbook. Atlantic Records also donated nine Macintosh color laptops and 17 laser printers.

For information on making a computer/software donation, 980-0294.

Are you somebody's secret (or not-so secret) admirer? Use *The WIRE* Classifieds to send your surprise message for Valentine's Day. Issue date is February 13; deadline, Friday, February 5. Call 751-8214.

COMING UP

Compiled by Claire Friendland

Mon., Jan. 25, 8:00 p.m. (note time change), meeting of the **Maple Tree Group.** Discussion of progress toward legislation for Island self-governance.

Tue., Jan. 26, 6:30 p.m., **Weight Watchers** session #10 and registration for Series II (10 Tuesdays starting Feb. 2, 6:30-7:30, Senior Center), **838-4747** for information.

Sun., Feb. 7, 10:00 a.m., **Roosevelt Island Art Association,** live model. For information, call **421-5939.**

Thur., Feb. 11, 10:00 a.m., **Eastwood Rent Increase Hearing,** DHCR offices, 25 Beaver Street, room 510. Group departure from Island, by subway, 8:30 a.m.

Thur., Feb. 11, 11:00 a.m., meeting of the **Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation Board of Directors,** Chapel of the Good Shepherd. Future meetings scheduled (all Thursdays) for 11:00 a.m. Mar. 11 and Apr. 8; 7:00 p.m. May 13; 11:00 a.m. June 10, July 8, August 12, Sept. 9; 7:00 p.m. Oct. 14; 11:00 a.m. Nov. 11, Dec. 9.

Fri.-Sat., Feb 12-13, Valentine's issue of ***The Main Street WIRE.*** **Deadlines:** Advertising in the paper, Fri., Feb. 5; decision on stuffers for *The Bag*, Mon., Feb. 15. **Future issues:** February 13, 27; Mar 13, 27 (Easter issue); Apr. 10, 24; May 8 (Mothers Day issue), 22; June 12 (Father's Day issue); July 3 (Fourth of July/Fireworks/Business cards issue), 31; Aug. 28 (Labor Day/Back-to-School issue); Sept. 11 (Rosh Hashanah issue), 25; Oct. 9, 23 (Halloween issue); Nov. 6, 20 (Thanksgiving/Business Cards issue); Dec. 4, 18 (Christmas/New Year issue); Jan. 8, 22, 2000. **Unscheduled EXTRA** editions may be published as news and advertising sup-

port warrant; advertisers who would like to be included, *without notice at the time*, are invited to call **826-9055** to make their interest known. **Phone/fax** for news, (212) **826-9055/755-2540**; urgent/breaking news, 917-353-1647; phone/fax for advertising inquiries, (212) **751-8214/755-2540**; phone/fax to list your Island organization's event here without charge, **317-8523** (provide your call-back phone number for possible follow-up).

At the Senior Center

Every week

Mondays

9:00 **Stay Well** (exercise)

Tuesdays

10-11 **Blood Pressure Screening**

1:30 **Bingo**

Wednesdays

9:00 **Stay Well** (Stretch)

10:00 **English as 2nd Language** (Beg)

11:00 **English as 2nd** (Intermediate)

1:30 **Lotto** (Games)

Thursdays

12:30 **Movie**

Fridays

10:00 **Billiards/Pool Table Open**

10:00 **English as 2nd Language**

Saturdays

7:30 **Bingo & Games**

SPORTSWIRE

WIRE sports reporter position open

If you're interested in handling this valuable volunteer contribution to the Roosevelt Island community, or would like to propose a candidate, please call **826-9055.**

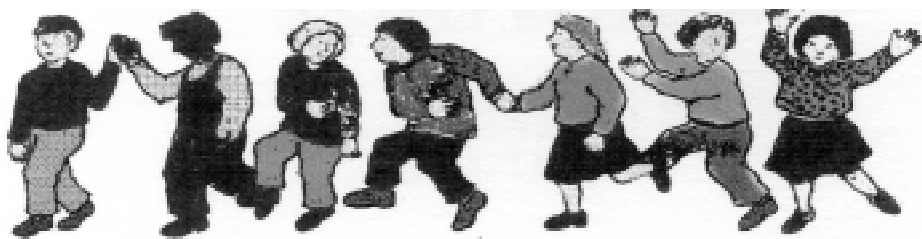


Abruzzo is Italy's pastoral land where the simple flavors of the earth and sea create a food of abundant ingredients and vibrant flavors. This is cooking at its very best, with flavors kept fresh and simple. Abruzzo's mountain curtain separated the region from mainstream Italy for many years, creating a unique cuisine. Many of these dishes have remained treasured secrets of our mother, Maddalena. By creating this restaurant, we wish to share the experience of growing up in a family of good cooks where food was and still is an expression of love and caring. This passion practiced in our Nonna's kitchen in Abruzzo and the same passion practiced in our Mother's kitchen here in America has proudly been passed on to us. This passion is what we proudly bring to our customers at Sac's. Cooking for family and for you, our customers, is a constant joy for us. To celebrate and make people happy are the reasons we opened this restaurant. Welcome!

A home away from home. Join us for dinner near our wood-burning fireplace or heated sidewalk cafe. All food is made in house, all dinners made to order. Nothing pre-made, everything made fresh.

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Ask for our daily specials



ISLAND KIDS
 INC.

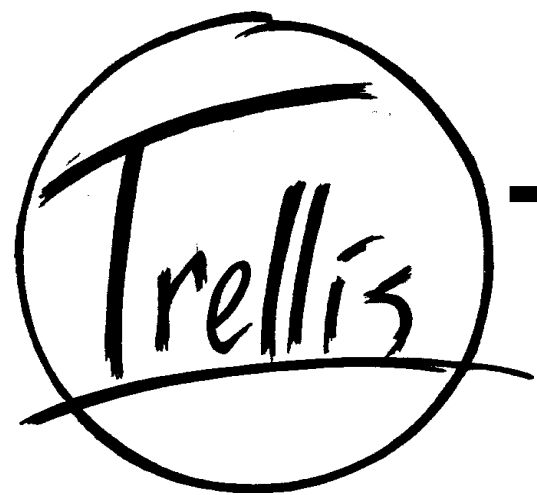
Winter Spring Semester

It's not too late to register for
this semester !

Why not check out our new classes,
 which include **Saturday mornings**
for toddlers, and a **Beginners**
Crafts class - Pre-teen to post 90
 age range !

Registration forms available at Public Safety,
 or call Kathleen at 832-8789

REMEMBER Island Kids is not **JUST**
 for kids anymore !



The answer is delivery...

And the question is what in the world
 can you do to relax after battling the
 elements and coming home, only to
 face preparation of dinner?

The answer is delivery of dinner
from the varied and tasty menu at
Trellis. Just call, and we'll handle
the weather for you, or...

See you at Trellis
752-1517

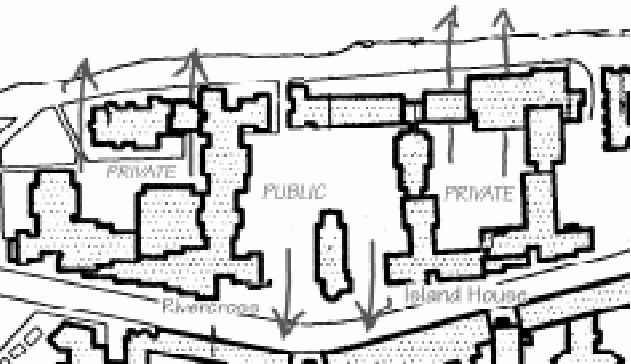
Better and better every day.
At the heart of the community,
next to the historic Chapel of the Good Shepherd

Two Southtown Proposals: “Towers in a Park” that Won’t Work

Architectural Commentary by Elie Gamburg

One reason I decided to study architecture has been living in one of the most successful architectural experiments of the Twentieth Century. Roosevelt Island is not just a unique part of New York City; it is also a laboratory for architectural ideas ranging from public space to the cross-ventilation of apartments.

Not only as a resident, but also as an architect, I take our Island very seriously precisely because it is a symbol of a “can-do” attitude: the notion that, given the power to make decisions, architects can make places that are not just groups of buildings, but are communities that are great to live and



In Northtown designs, courtyards are clearly defined as public or private, and they connect appropriately to the surrounding spaces.

spend time in. Roosevelt Island is as much a symbol of sound planning the world over as it is a symbol of progressive development in market-driven New York.

It is because of this that I am very distressed by the two plans unveiled in the passing weeks by *The WIRE*. Both are essentially “towers in a park.” Architects created this concept in order to solve the problems of the cities of the early century that were dark, dank, and severely overcrowded. Making buildings go vertical with lots of open park space around them seemed a way to alleviate these problems. The idea of placing buildings in beautifully-landscaped settings seems like a good one. But, while the end is admirable, the idea had many flaws. To this day, the problems of poor design plague housing complexes all over the world. Despite the fact that some people might even think that Roosevelt Island actually is a group of towers in a park, Roosevelt Island is amazing because it finds ways of making this concept work, even when in most other cases it has failed. It is a good idea to identify the problems of the “tower in a park” scheme that are evident in the two proposals for Southtown.

Vast open spaces, with no specific uses, become unusable and wasted.

Once we remove the grid of city streets full of continuous buildings, the spaces that are supposed to become great parks become isolated, cold, and impersonal areas that are so vast that they are useless. Even though we sometimes hate to admit it, people actually like streets. We like other people around us. We are uncomfortable if we wander alone in miles of trees. Even our suburban friends, who seem to like doing just that, spend a lot of time at places like the mall, which is a sort of city in a bottle that is more crowded than most cities ever are.

Like Central Park, parks need to be defined by an urban mass around them. They cannot define an urban mass themselves. Covered by trees, without specific uses like boating lakes, soccer fields, or barbecues, these parks become places that people are afraid to use unless they seek to do things that need to be hidden from observation.

What happens to these vast open spaces is apparent when one takes a look at the public housing developments all over the city such as the Queensbridge Houses and even privately-developed “communities” such as stark Lefrak City in Queens. The open spaces are too big to be maintained well and these quickly fall apart. The towers become disjointed from these parks. The only heavily-used path is the one that leads most directly from the building’s lobby to the main streets that line the sides of the development.

Roosevelt Island offers an elegant solution. While the impression of vast areas of open spaces is kept up, in actuality the size and nature of these open spaces is very controlled. This is done by combining the “tower in a park” concept with a courtyard scheme. Alternating courtyards, either enclosed or open to the street, create a variant between public and private space. Take a look at the courtyard in Rivercross, which is a beautiful, if underused, private space that is surrounded by the apartment building with only two small openings out to the river beyond. Compare that to the Church Courtyard, which opens out to Main Street, becoming a very public space clearly defined by Rivercross and Island House. North of Eastwood is a park divided so that each and every part of it has a specific use – and it is constantly used. Even the underused courtyards of the apartment buildings like Eastwood and Island House were meant to be used by the students in their mini-schools. In Eastwood, one courtyard even has a stage meant for summer performances.

The courtyard concept is but one crucial part of the overall scheme of Roosevelt Island that is ignored in the new

plans. The Davis Brody Bond plan makes a passing reference to it by curling some of the corners of the buildings around certain spaces, but they contain and define those spaces no more than a glass that has a big hole in its side can hold water.

The buildings do not relate well to the human scale. They are too massive, too boring, and too overbearing.

Both proposals talk about the “human scale.” Passing references to low-rise buildings are supposed to suffice in addressing concerns that the monolithic towers being proposed will be too oppressive. Tall buildings, such as those on Roosevelt Island, can quickly become too large and too overbearing. But token pieces of buildings stuck out in front of large slabs do not moderate the size of the masses behind them – instead they tend to look as absurd as a sixth toe.

It is tempting to think that adding low-rises to the towers will help make the scale more human. The Davis Brody Bond plan “hides” the masses of the towers by shifting them behind walls of low-rise structures. The buildings of the Manhattan side are an amalgam of different height pieces. Unless this mixture is done well, however, the result can look very awkward. The Thoreson and Linard plan tries to make the towers shorter and so small in plan that they seem almost insignificant. But it is not the height that is a problem. It is the shape and distribution of the building masses that is.

The buildings already on Roosevelt Island use several different approaches to solve the problem of scale. The architects of Roosevelt Island played up the size of the buildings. They made them broad, large, tall, and dominant so that they became identifiable. To make them feel less bulky, the architects began to push and pull the façades of the buildings. Called *crenellating*, this process allowed them to create more places for windows to pick up breezes. This answered the need for more ventilation for the apartments. It also makes the masses of the buildings seem more fragile and fragmented not just massive. Take a look at Eastwood, the largest and heaviest building on the Island. It would be a very boring wall running along one side of Main Street if it were not for all those bay window projections that dot its façade.

In order to make the bases of these massive buildings seem more human-scale instead of feeling as heavy as the vast buildings above, for the bottom 15 feet of the buildings all over the Island are bare concrete thAs a final touch, for the



Eastwood’s varied facade makes it gentler on the eye. Its covered sidewalk makes its scale more human and seems to lift the building.

More importantly, both proposals treat Main Street primarily as a transportation axis when in reality the street now acts as an open public space. Boxed in by the buildings on either side and lined with stores, Main Street is really a long room. In the proposals, the Main Street extensions lack definition and resemble a suburban parkway more than a street for pedestrians.

The original architects concentrated everything on one street that became the central spine for the entire Island, instead of using two streets. All public spaces, from stores

to parks, open to this central street. It is not too straight. Instead, it shifts so that we cannot see from one end of the Island to the other. This does two things. First, our eyes can only guess what lies beyond the turn ahead and instinctively, even if we know what is there, we tend to think it is more of the same of what we see now. The result is that the shifts allow Roosevelt Island to seem bigger and more continuous than it actually is. Conversely, it allows the overall mass of Roosevelt Island to appear smaller because we only deal with small segments of it at any one time.

The towers themselves are uncomfortable for people to use.

Roosevelt Island is not only well designed on the outside. The buildings themselves are more friendly and comfortable than many apartment buildings in New York. Certain fundamental things are missing from the new buildings, however. They are more

like the typical cramped New York apartment building. The hallways, completely enclosed by apartments on all sides, are narrow and claustrophobic and will be uncomfortable for people to use. Backed up against the hallways, the apartments lack cross ventilation. In the Davis Brody Bond plan, the building façades are flattened to resemble large slabs. The apartments become cubby-holes in which people are stuck looking out at pretty views that look great from above but, because of poor planning, are virtually unusable from below.

In contrast to dark hallways in the center towers, Roosevelt Island’s existing buildings have many innovations that make them more comfortable. Most of the halls have windows. They do not seem claustrophobic but appear to be large and open. Eastwood takes this concept one step further with its revolutionary “triple-loaded” corridor design in which apartments rise over and sink under the hallway so that they extend the width of the building and thus have full cross ventilation. Even in buildings without cross-ventilated apartments, the crenellated façades allow windows to catch more breezes. In front of most of the elevator banks, the architects also placed open spaces that make the wait for the elevator more open. No provision for this sort of space is made in either of the proposed Southtown plans. Even in buildings without cross-ventilated apartments, the crenellated façades allow windows to catch more breezes.

Conclusions

The two plans for Southtown propose space that is too open, too vast, and too uncontrolled. They offer buildings that, while not too tall, are ill-conceived in relationship to the street-wall or to the sea-wall. They lack cohesion with the current buildings, even going so far as to cut themselves off, using a barrier building South of Rivercross. The architects appear not to have learned what the designers of Roosevelt Island have to teach us.

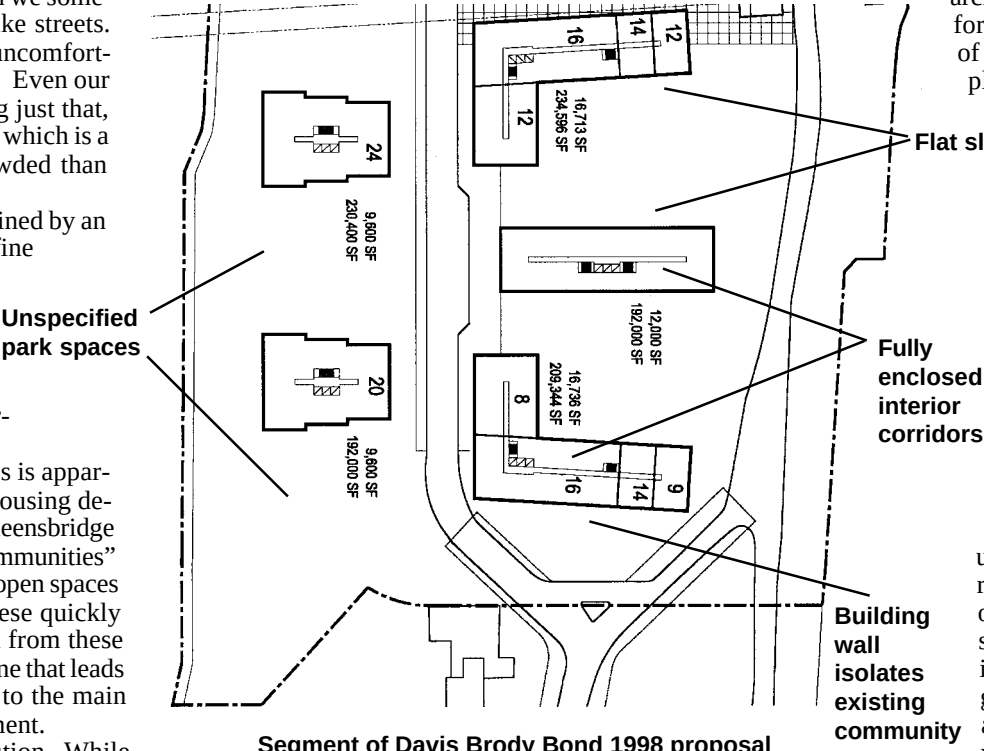
I believe the architects should try to take the highly effective courtyard concept a step further by activating these courtyards. They are underused because they are uni-functional as natural recreation spaces. To make them more usable, other activities, restaurants, stores, and community spaces need to open out to them. For example the idea of converting the old schools to dorms seems good, given that it will activate these spaces. The architects should also try to turn the Island as a whole into a more vibrant enclave by including a

more diverse program: allowing some of the towers sitting on courtyard bases to have commercial functions would give the Island an active and dynamic source of population that would patronize our restaurants, park and sports facilities during lunch, and would tie us even closer to the rest of the city than we already are.

In the end, the buildings proposed seem to me to be a “cookie-cutter” solution to the problem at hand. They are shapes dropped on a flat “baking sheet” with little apparent concern for how they relate to the open space around them, what this open space will do, or even for what they look like inside.

The Southtown development should not suffer such a fate. At worst, it should blindly continue the precedents set by the original buildings (and followed in fairly large part by Manhattan Park), and, at best, it should build on the lessons taught and learned by the Northtown developments.

Elie Gamburg, an Island resident, is studying architecture at Cornell.



Segment of Davis Brody Bond 1998 proposal

bottom fifteen feet of the buildings all over the Island bare concrete is used rather than the ceramic tiles or other materials that cover upper portions of the buildings. The covered sidewalks of Eastwood and Westview are also this height. The height of these loggias is such that instead of being pressed down, these spaces seem to lift the buildings. Though powerful and heavy, the buildings seem to float above a very friendly and human-scale Main Street.

The proposals do not maintain the existing qualities of Main Street.

The proposals have different approaches to the extension of Main Street. In the Davis Brody Bond proposal, the current axis is unceremoniously terminated at the first apartment building. The street divides into two parts. The new complex is visually isolated. In the Thoreson and Linard proposal, Main Street pulls the Queens Side too far from the water. This leaves too much undefined space on that side.

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Safety from page 1

nize that Public Safety’s structure isn’t up to the job. Vertical patrols are very, very infrequent, too spotty. They lack the coverage we need.” Vass advocates hiring retired police officers, believing the age gap between them and Island youth would be an advantage. The implication is that the Island’s young people – particularly those who cause problems – don’t take Public Safety officers seriously.

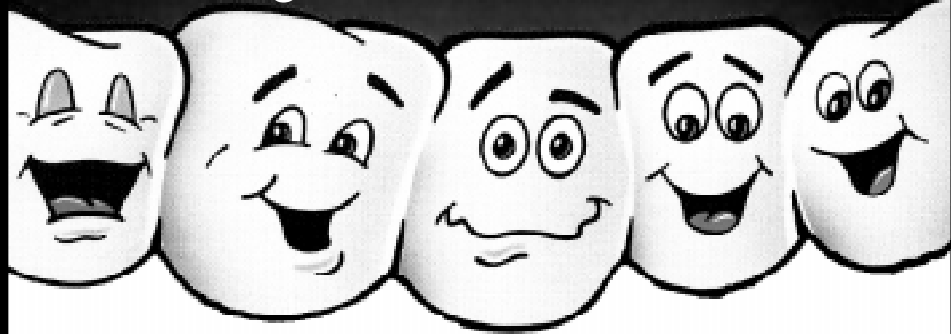
On that subject, Isley says, “It’s important that Public Safety be respected, have the strength, tools, and manpower to do the job. It’s important that management and the community support Public Safety. If we don’t, our children won’t. If we bash Public Safety, our children will, and that’s the element we’re trying to control.”

Isley says her office is taking a very aggressive posture toward “holdover proceedings,” which are stages of legal inactivity between court appearances in eviction proceedings. She says that, at any given time, Housing Management has a considerable number of cases in the works. She also reports that she has begun meeting monthly with Manhattan Park management to share information about troublemakers who might attempt transfers between buildings.

Isley says, “We have some serious issues to deal with vis-a-vis security, that this Island needs to address before the problem is allowed to grow and get totally out of hand. The only way we can have a safe environment is if we truly all work together. Public Safety can’t do it alone. Management can’t. Residents can’t. But if we all work together, we’ll have a much safer environment.

“There needs to be more accountability for the young people on this Island. Until that happens, and parents take responsibility for their children and for their guests, nothing will change. A lot of it is our children, and parents taking responsibility would help a lot.”

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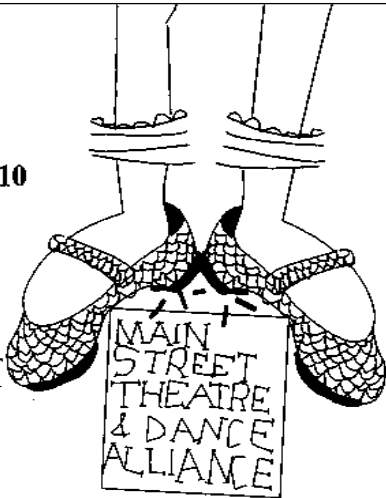
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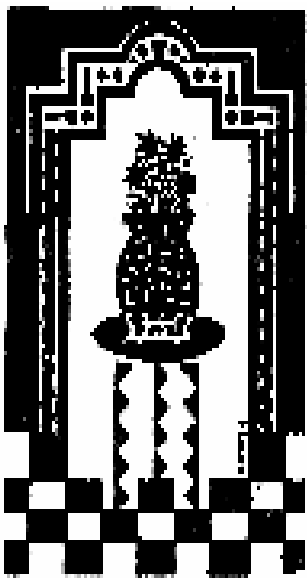
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