

New Welfare Island (1975–76)

Welfare (now Roosevelt) Island is a long (about three kilometers), narrow (200 meters on average) island in the East River, more or less parallel to Manhattan. Originally the island was the site of hospitals and asylums — generally a storehouse for “undesirables.”

Since 1965, it has been undergoing a half-hearted “urbanization.” The question is: is it to be a true part of New York — with all the agonies that implies — or is it to be a civilized escape zone, a kind of *resort* that offers, from a safe distance, the spectacle of Manhattan burning?

The island’s planners have so far chosen the latter alternative — although no more than 150 meters from Manhattan, it is now connected to the mother island merely by a cable car (colored in a cheerful “holiday” purple) whose service could easily be suspended in case of urban emergencies.

For over a century, Welfare Island’s dominant architectural incident had been the crossing of the monumental Queensboro Bridge that connects Manhattan to Queens (without an exit to the smaller island) and casually cuts Welfare Island into two parts. The area north of the bridge has now been developed by the Urban Development Corporation, a New York State agency, with a series of blocks that terrace down with equal enthusiasm to both Manhattan *and* Queens (why?), and which are arranged on both sides of a picturesquely kinked Main Street. New Welfare Island, on the contrary, is a *metropolitan* settlement on the sector *south* of Queensboro Bridge, a stretch that coincides with the area between 50th and 59th streets in Manhattan.

The project is intended as a resuscitation of some of the features that made Manhattan’s architecture unique: its ability to fuse the popular with the metaphysical, the commercial with the sublime, the refined with the primitive — which together explain Manhattan’s former capacity to seduce a mass audience for itself. It also revives Manhattan’s tradition of “testing” certain themes and intentions on smaller, experimental “laboratory” islands (such as Coney Island at the beginning of the century).

For this demonstration, the Manhattan Grid is extended across the East River to create eight new blocks on the island. These sites will be used as a “parking lot” for formally, programmatically and ideologically competing architectures — which would confront each other from their identical parking spaces.

All the blocks are connected by an elevated travelator (moving pavement)

that runs from the bridge southward down the center of the island: an accelerated architectural promenade. At the tip of the island it becomes amphibious, leaving the land to turn into a *trottoir* on the river, connecting floating attractions too ephemeral to establish themselves on land. Those blocks that are not occupied are left vacant for future generations of builders.

From north to south, New Welfare Island so far accommodates the following structures:

1. Built around Queensboro Bridge without actually touching it is the Entrance Convention Center — a formal entrance porch to Manhattan that is, at the same time, a colossal “roadblock” separating the southern half of the island from the northern. An auditorium for mass meetings is slotted underneath the bridge; two marble slabs contain cellular office accommodation. Between them, above the bridge, they support a suspended glass object — whose steps reflect the curve of the bridge — that contains a stacked sports and entertainment center for the Conventioneers.

2. Buildings that were once proposed for New York, but for whatever reason aborted, will be built “retroactively” and parked on the blocks to complete the history of Manhattanism. One such building is a Suprematist Architecton stuck by Malevich on a postcard of the Manhattan skyline — sometime in the early twenties in Moscow — but never received. Due to an unspecified scientific process that would be able to suspend gravity, the involvement of Malevich’s Architectons with the surface of the earth was tenuous: they could assume, at any moment, the status of artificial planets visiting the earth only occasionally — if at all. The Architectons had no program: “Built without purpose, [they] may be used by man for his own purposes....” They were supposed to be “conquered” programmatically by a future civilization that deserved them. Without function, Architectons simply exist, built from “opaque glass, concrete, tarred felt, heated by electricity, a planet without pipes.... The planet is as simple as a tiny speck, everywhere accessible to the man living inside it who, in fine weather, may sit on its surface....”

3. In the middle of the New Welfare Island development is the harbor, carved out of the rock to receive floating structures such as boats — in this case Norman Bel Geddes’ “special streamlined yacht” (1932).



New Welfare Island, axonometric. Manhattan is on the left, Queens on the right, New Welfare Island in the middle. From top to bottom: Entrance Convention Center penetrated by Queensboro Bridge; Suprematist Architecton; harbor with streamlined yacht; "Chinese" swimming pool; Welfare Palace Hotel with raft; plaza; river-trottoir. Opposite the UN Building on Manhattan Island is the Counter-UN standing on a small island. On Manhattan itself can be seen the "separation" of Hotel Sphinx and the RCA Building. In Queens is "desperation park" with its modern housing; the suburb; the Pepsi-Cola sign; the Power Station. Approaching in the river is the floating pool.

4. South of the harbor is a park with a "Chinese" swimming pool in the form of a square, part of which is carved out of the island, while the complementary part is built out on the river. The original coastline has become three-dimensional — an aluminum Chinese bridge that follows in plan the line of the natural coastline. Two revolving doors at either end lead to locker rooms inside the two halves of the bridge (one for men, the other for women). Undressed, the sexes emerge from the middle of the bridge, from where they can swim to the recessed beach.

5. The tip of the island is occupied by Welfare Palace Hotel and a semicircular plaza.

6. The travelator continues on the water to a point just south of 42nd Street. Along its way, it passes a small island opposite the United Nations Building, to which the Counter-UN has been attached: a slab that repeats the silhouette of the original, with an attached auditorium. The open space of this small island serves the recreational needs of the office workers of this Counter-UN.

Welfare Palace Hotel (1976)

The Welfare Palace Hotel — a “City within a City” — occupies the block near the tip of the island. It accommodates 10,000 guests, and each day as many visitors again. It is a composition of seven towers and two slabs. The ten-story slabs are placed on the edges of the block to define the “field” of the Hotel. Since the island tapers toward the tip, the block of the Hotel is incomplete, but the two slabs still run the full width of the island into the water so that the shore runs through the Hotel as a geological fault. On the field between the slabs, six towers are arranged in a V formation, pointing at Manhattan. A seventh tower on the Queens side does not “fit” on the island; it has become a horizontal water-scraper with a roof-garden on its former facade.

The towers increase in height as they move away from Manhattan; the tops are so designed that they “stare” at Manhattan, especially at the RCA Building, which steps down toward the Hotel.

The Hotel has four facades, designed individually to respond to the different formal and symbolic demands of their respective situations. The southern facade, along the semicircular plaza, is the dominant elevation. Three-dimensional fragments have dissociated themselves from the main slab to lead their own lives. The fragments have a double function: together, they form a decorative relief with an explicit figurative message — a city collapsing; separately, they provide differentiation of the Hotel’s accommodation — small palatial skyscrapers that can be reserved for private functions. The materials of the fragments are as diverse as possible — marble, steel, plastic, glass — providing the Hotel with the history it would otherwise lack.

The ground floor of the Hotel is subdivided into a series of independent zones, each with its own particular function:

The first zone — the sector closest to Manhattan — is a theater and night-club-restaurant on the twin themes of *shipwreck* and *uninhabited island*. It holds 2,000 people — only a small percentage of the Hotel’s visitors. Its floor is inundated. A stage is carved out of the steel hull of an overturned, sinking ship. Columns are disguised as lighthouses, frantically piercing the darkness with their beams. Guests can sit, eat and watch performances on the terraces along the water or they may board the lifeboats — luxuriously equipped with velvet benches and marble tabletops — that emerge from a hole in the sinking ship to move slowly through the interior on submerged tracks. Opposite the sinking ship is a sandy island, symbolizing Manhattan in its virgin state. It can be used for dancing. Outside the Hotel, exactly



Welfare Palace Hotel. Cutaway axonometric shows, consecutively on the ground floor: inundated theater/restaurant/nightclub (with uninhabited island, overturned ship, lighthouse columns, dining terraces, lifeboats); island-as-found-plaza with shopping; reception area of Hotel; access to the horizontal water-scraper (concealed between the rear four skyscrapers with park on top).

On each side of the Hotel's transverse axis is a long low slab — one overlooks the "Chinese" pool, the other the semicircular plaza. The facade of this latter slab has been fragmented into a three-dimensional mural which functions as luxury accommodation.

In V formation are six skyscrapers — each with its own club (whose respective themes are related to the mythology established on the ground floor of each tower).

Tower 1: locker rooms, square beach surrounded by circumferential pool; tower 2: ship's bridge as bar; tower 3: Expressionist club as climax of the mural; tower 4: vacant; tower 5: waterfall/restaurant; tower 6: Freud Unlimited Club.

The light blue in front of the Hotel is an artificial skating rink; to the left of the Hotel is a park with the "Chinese" swimming pool; in front of the Hotel is a gigantic three-dimensional *Raft of the Medusa* executed in plastic (with a small area equipped for dancing).

between Manhattan and Welfare Island, floats a gigantic reproduction of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*; it is a symbol of Manhattan's metropolitan agonies — proving both the need and the impossibility of "escape." It is an equivalent of 19th-century public sculpture. When the weather permits it, the lifeboats leave the interior of the Hotel to go out on the river. They circle around the raft, compare the monumental suffering of its occupants to their own petty anxieties, watch the moonlit sky and even board the sculpture. A section is equipped as dance floor, relaying the music that is produced inside the Hotel through hidden microphones.

The second zone of the Hotel — open to the air — represents the island *as found*, and is lined with shops.

The third zone — where the course of the travelator is interrupted — is the reception area of the Hotel.

Beyond that is the fourth zone — the horizontal water-scraper with a park on top and conference facilities inside.

There is a different club at the top of each skyscraper. Their glass visors can retract to expose the club's activities to sunlight.

The themes of the clubs relate to the themes established directly below them on the ground floor, so that elevators shuttle between two interpretations of the same "story."

The first tower — above the uninhabited island on the ground floor — has a square beach and a circumferential swimming pool. A glass plate separates locker rooms for men and women.

The second tower — the only office building — is equipped, with the "displaced" bridge of the sinking ship. Guests feel like captains here, drinking their cocktails in the euphoria of apparent control, oblivious to the disaster that occurs 30 floors below them.

The third tower is an Expressionistic environment, concluding the agitation of the south facade in a paroxysm of decorative arbitrariness. The top of the fourth tower is vacant and awaits future, unspecified occupancies.

The top of the fifth tower, which stands in water, is a waterfall whose unpredictable reflections will be visible from the city.

The top of the sixth tower, the one furthest removed from Manhattan, is terminated by a three-dimensional allegorical interior that extrapolates and "predicts" the real destinies of the RCA, Chrysler and Empire State buildings, of whose tortured relationships the Hotel is the "postponed" offspring.

That part of the semicircular plaza in front of the Hotel which is not on the island is turned into ice. North of the Hotel is the "Chinese" swimming pool.