Co-op City: The Dream and the Reality

by
Nina Wohl

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Elizabeth Blackmar, Department of History

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There is a piece of land in the northeast Bronx where dreams are dreamt. Co-op City was born of those dreams. Situated on the grounds of Freedomland, Co-op City is the largest cooperative housing complex in America, possibly in the world. It contains more than 15,000 apartments with more than 70,000 rooms providing a home for more than 60,000 people. If Co-op city were not part of New York City, it would be the tenth largest city in New York State.¹

Co-op City held out the promise of refuge from urban strife. Co-op City was to be a haven for the middle class. The residents would have the benefit of homeownership and freedom from landlord tyranny while remaining in New York City. They would live in big apartments with open views, lots of light, walk-in closets, parquet floors, free heat, and air conditioning. In addition, the 300-acre complex would be self-contained, featuring 90 stores and 6 schools.² Co-op City would be a city-within-a-city.

Originally, the complex attracted mostly Jewish, Irish and Italian families that lived in Tremont, Fordham Road and the Grand Concourse. The hope was that Co-op City would be a racially integrated community and a model for the rest of the country. This was not to be the case. At the outset, it was 75% Jewish. Today, it is over 75% black and Hispanic. This change reflects the greater transformation that took place in the Bronx itself.

Early residents felt they had received a small piece of the American pie. Arthur Taub, a retired health-care consultant for the United Federation of Teachers told reporters: “We heard about the Co-op City project, with its spacious apartments and low equity and low maintenance. We were looking for someplace we could live forever. We thought this was Shangri-La.”³ In 2006 a twenty-seven year resident and board member, exalted, "It's incredible how decent most folks are here, what's been accomplished in Co-op City, socially, is beyond imagining. From all these different parts and all these difficulties, we've made a safe, viable community. We take people with backgrounds from all over the world and chew 'em up and digest 'em and spit out Americans. The rest of the country should take a lesson from here."⁴ Those feelings were borne out by the poetry found in the pages of Co-op City Times:
Ode to Co-op City

From every road it comes in view
Rising up like mountain ranges do
Swinging round like a Chinese wall
In masses hold all eyes in thrall.

At night from a restless pillow
I gaze out at a lighted willow
What has so long been sought

Here at last has been wrought.
Are there any flaws, perhaps?
Who else came to fill the gaps?
There may be more perfect ventures
For those who earn debentures
For this bold new concept
No other planner were so adept.

- Israel Kovler, 5C-12F

Such warm feelings cannot hide the fact that from the start Co-op City was plagued by naysayers and critics. Architects called it “sterile site planning and uninspired architectural design,” “sterile and blunt,” and “fairly hideous.” Many saw it as the worst example of what New York City had become. “It is part of that New York which is ‘producing a bumper crop of human failure through environmental failure’.”

These opposing views question the very nature of Co-op City. It seemed to promise a sanctuary and sort of utopia, but did the reality belie that promise? No matter how one feels about the complex, its story is the story of urban America in the late twentieth century. Co-op City’s narrative is just one in the larger story of the Bronx and New York City. It is a small snippet of the larger forces at play.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

The Bronx is located between Manhattan and Westchester County. Though originally part of the city of Yonkers and Westchester County, over time it became part of New York City. The state legislature
annexed Kingsbridge, West Farms and Morrisania to New York City in 1873. In 1895 the territory east of the Bronx River, including the Town of Westchester, and portions of Eastchester and Pelham, were annexed to the city. City Island joined in 1896. The year 1898 marked its official birth as one of the five boroughs of New York City. Until the twentieth century, the Bronx was populated with small farms supplying city markets. The expansion of the subway lines into the Bronx before and after World War I, made the borough more accessible to Manhattan. This increased land values and encouraged development. Today, the Bronx is the City’s greenest borough and is a way station between urban and suburban life.

One of the major arteries connecting the Bronx and Co-op City to the larger New York community is the Hutchinson River Parkway, named for Anne Hutchinson. Her story began more than 300 years before the building of Co-op City and foreshadows the strength and resolve of the future denizens of Co-op City. Anne Hutchinson was an immigrant in search of a better life. Hutchinson’s independent spirit gave her the fortitude to live life her way. When her beliefs came into conflict with the Puritan authority of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, she was banished. For a time, she joined Roger Williams in Rhode Island. Fearful that Massachusetts would take over Rhode Island, she relocated her family to the northern reaches of the Dutch New Netherlands. Anne Hutchinson is remembered because she challenged religious authority and fought for liberty and toleration. Those ideals would be embodied in the future residents Co-op City.

Fast forward into the twentieth-century, August 1959, when developers broke ground on “an undeveloped 305-acre parcel of swampland,” that would become Freedomland. It is a fitting name for a place of dreams. Dreams of freedom and liberty are quintessentially American. Americans are aspirational. Life in the United States promises the pursuit of possibilities with no boundaries. Freedomland was to be a theme park that would embody this. As promised by the president of Freedomland’s parent company, “Here at Freedomland, we’re bringing the highlights of our history to life
– vividly and excitingly. Every youngster who sees the re-creation we have to offer will look at our history with new eyes.”

In a more practical sense, Freedomland was supposed to be the Disneyland of the East. At a cost of $65 million, Freedomland was larger in both size and capacity than Disneyland. The size and scope of Freedomland would be equal to its successor. Just as Co-op City has no equal in size, Freedomland was the largest outdoor family center in its day. Its construction required thousands of trucks to fill in the swampland. Bulldozers created new surfaces and built mountains. They dredged channels to make lakes and rivers. Freedomland was landscaped with 10,000 trees, 35,000 shrubs, eight miles of navigable lakes and streams, and over 10 million gallons of water to fill in their Great Lakes. Eighty-five acres was transformed into the shape of the continental United States.

Advertisers played up the park’s educational aspect. They hoped Freedomland would be a new kind of entertainment. Like the park itself, the advertising campaign was overblown; its budget was set at $750,000. In order to reach the 15 million people who lived within a 50-mile radius, there was a schedule “of 1,000-line ads, 400 outdoor billboards, 1,000 posters in 263 railway stations, 2,000 posters in 490 subway stations, 13,500 car cards in 7,500 subway cars . . . 700 radio spots, . . . [and] 125 [television spots] on six New York stations.” Their long-range goals was to make Freedomland a national institution.

Advertisement in the New York Times promised that there was nothing else like it in the world. “In one sweeping panorama, you can see, hear, feel and taste the living history of our land. . . . By re-creating the scope of American Adventure, Freedomland brings history to life, makes an educational experience vastly entertaining.” The park was designed to handle 90,000 visitors a day. Thirty-seven nostalgic attractions were designed to entertain 35,000 patrons per hour. Restaurants were designed to feed 32,000 people an hour.
Opening day, June 19, 1960, promised to fulfill the expectations of the developers. On that day, attendance was 61,500 with as many as 40,000 on the grounds at a time. The Hutchinson River Parkway came to a virtual standstill. The parking lot was filled to capacity and the police had to shut down all entrances to the park for four hours.\textsuperscript{18}

Its early success was misleading. Freedomland did not live up to the hype and visitors rarely returned for a second visit. It repeatedly tried to reinvent itself, but to no avail. Attendance fell, security issues abounded and it could not compete with the World’s Fair at Flushing Meadow Park. “Even before Freedomland’s first cash customer passed through the turnstile, the park was $7,000,000 in debt.”\textsuperscript{19} In 1964, the park filed for bankruptcy. The dream did not match the reality. One Manhattanite commented, “I guess the name was repulsive and vulgar, . . . The word ‘freedom’ has some meaning for me. I wouldn’t want to go to an amusement park called Libertyland or Democracyland either.”\textsuperscript{20} In the end, Freedomland became Apartmentland.\textsuperscript{21} The hope was that Co-op City would provide a new kind of Freedomland for middle-class New Yorkers.

\textbf{HOUSING and THE BRONX}

Co-op City was not the first of its kind, but the largest. It is a descendant of earlier efforts to provide affordable housing to all New Yorkers. It seems that there has always been a housing shortage in New York City. Despite this, “for more than a century, New York has outpaced every other American city in creating policies and programs to provide decent housing for people of modest means.”\textsuperscript{22} The data is impressive. One in eight New Yorkers live in some kind of subsidized housing. Rent control and rent stabilization cover one-half of two million privately owned rental units.\textsuperscript{23}

New York City is a city of immigrants. Drawn to the United States in search of a better life, the \textit{wretched refuse} of Emma Lazarus’ \textit{The New Colossus} made their home in the crowded tenements of the Lower Eastside. As transportation improved, those who had “made it” left. One preferred location was the Bronx. Settlement in the Bronx was considered a step up. Moving to the Bronx was a sign that their
American dreams were coming true. Large numbers of Eastern European Jews, Italians and Irish immigrants escaped the harsh environment of the tenement as their lives improved socially and economically.  

Consequently, the Bronx became an alternative to the crowded Lower Eastside and the problems of the slum. In 1926, the New York State legislature passed the Limited Dividends Housing Companies Act. Lawmakers hoped that the law would improve the untenable housing conditions found in poor neighborhoods. When Governor Alfred E. Smith, a former resident of the Lower Eastside and a champion of reform legislation, signed the bill into law his aims were clear.

In approving this bill I do so with the sincere hope that it may prove the beginning of a lasting movement to wipe out of our state those blots upon the civilization, the old dilapidated, dark, unsanitary, unsafe tenement houses that long since became unfit for human habitation and certainly are no place for future citizens of New York to grow in.

This law supported the development and operation of cooperative housing developments. Cooperative housing would reinvent the tenant-landlord relationship. Individuals would combine their resources and share ownership. Collectively, residents would be their own landlords. After purchasing stock in the development, the tenant-shareholder would hold a proprietary lease and pay a monthly maintenance to cover the cost of upkeep, underlying mortgage and real estate taxes. If a tenant wanted to move out, they would sell their shares back to the cooperative and would have their initial investment refunded. This was not a profit making enterprise, but a break-even business. Shared ownership would be “based on seven principles of cooperation: open membership; one member-one vote; savings returned to members in proportion to their patronage; neutrality in religion and politics; limited return on investment; constant education; and constant expansion.” The housing concept they developed would become the cornerstone of Mitchell-Lama legislation that enabled the building of Co-op City.

Cooperative principles had its roots in Marxist and Socialist movements that developed in response to the hardships and inequities of industrialization. Like many other groups, Jews became a
force for societal reform. The origins of their desire for secular change is found in the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment. Jewish Emancipation resulting from the French Revolution led many Jews to rethink life under the autocracy of the Russian Empire. Russian Jews became associated with political liberalism and joined a wide array of socialist movements. They shared the belief that economic equality was the essential ingredient to realizing political equality. Their objective was to establish a cooperative economy in which inequality would be eliminated. In the United States, this translated into involvement in the union movement. Two unions that would play a significant role in the fight for workers’ rights and the development of cooperative housing were the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.

The first cooperative developments in the Bronx opened in 1927. They were the Workers Cooperative Colony known as The Coops and the Sholem Aleichem Houses known as the Yiddish Cooperative.28 Both developments were influenced by socialist ideology and were meant to be more than just housing. They provided numerous services including child care, reading groups, lectures, concerts, dances and other social events.29 Both complexes were culturally and religiously Jewish. Although neither would survive beyond World War II, their example would influence subsequent life in Co-op City.

A third development, considered one of the most successful endeavors in cooperative housing was the Amalgamated Houses. The Amalgamated was built under the auspices of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and the guidance of Abraham E. Kazan. Like The Coops and the Sholem Aleichem Houses, the Amalgamated had a strong Jewish identity and Kazan made sure that they had “space for every kind of creative expressive activity: dance, music, art, pottery, theatre in Yiddish and English, woodworking, and photography. There were Sunday discussions and political debates. . . . an auditorium [was built] for lectures, concerts, meetings, and other cultural events. The co-op began its own in-house newspaper, The Community News.”30 Kazan saw the Amalgamated as part of the continuum in the fight for workers’ rights.
It was offered to us to demonstrate that through cooperative efforts we can better the lot of our co-workers. We have also been given the privilege to show that where all personal gain and benefit is eliminated, greater good can be accomplished for the benefit of all. It remains too for the members of our Cooperative Community to exert their efforts to run this cooperative and make it more useful, and more interesting, for all who live in these apartments.  

Today’s mission for Amalgamated Housing still supports Kazan’s vision:

To provide quality housing and a strong community for people of moderate income. To operate and live in accordance with cooperative ideals, including democratic governance, shared responsibility, constant education and mutual respect.

The Great Depression interrupted the further development of cooperative housing. Instead, New York politicians used New Deal money to build low-income housing. In 1934, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) was created. When the NYCHA was formed, a great number of working-class people were still living in filthy and dangerously decrepit housing. During the years of depression and war, the “projects” built were designed to provide decent housing for the marginalized of New York. Their aim was to improve the quality of life for people who wanted to a better life. At the dedication of the Williamsburg Houses in 1936, Senator Robert F. Wagner summed up their intention: “Every time we give an American child a better place to live in we take another step toward transforming human liberty from an idle dream to an inspiring reality.”

**SLUM CLEARANCE and ROBERT MOSES**

After the war, this determination in conjunction with the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) would reshape housing in New York and the Bronx. Central to this story is redlining and Robert Moses.

The housing market was devastated by the Great Depression. Starting in 1933, Congress passed a series of laws to fix the housing market. Their objective was to refinance and prevent foreclosures, to
make housing more affordable, to make low-interest long-term loans to local governments for slum clearance, and to construct new low-income housing. The Home Owner’s Loan Corporation Act, the National Housing Act, and the Housing Authority were designed for this purpose. As a result, the method used in property appraisal was systematized; it came to be known as redlining.

Properties needed to be assessed in order to insure that housing funds were properly invested. Evaluation of risk was based on occupation, income, ethnicity, and the age of existing residents. Property was valued based on the age, type of construction, price range, sales demand, and general state of repair of the housing stock. Redlining undervalued neighborhoods that were dense, mixed or aging. It favored homogeneous neighborhoods and in demand locations. A scale from A to D was used to rate locations. Only the best neighborhoods were given as an A, and Jewish and Black neighborhoods were not considered the best. Type D neighborhoods were outlined in red and considered the most risky.35 “In the course of accomplishing its mission, the HOLC developed real-estate appraisal methods that discriminated against racial and ethnic minorities and against older, industrial cities . . . and the FHA clearly favored homogeneous subdivisions over industrial, aging, or heterogeneous neighborhoods.”36

In the Bronx, only Riverdale received an A. Even the Champs-Élysées of the Bronx, the Grand Concourse, earned a C. Large areas of the borough were filled with apartment houses that were declared the riskiest of all, D. These ratings prevented landlords from renewing their mortgages at low interest rates. They could not raise the money needed to keep their buildings in good repair.37

Redlining undercut people’s lives. Their ability to revitalize their own neighborhoods was limited. As a result, neighborhoods were subjected to slum clearance and urban renewal. Ultimately, FHA loans hastened the decay of inner-city neighborhoods. By favoring single-family construction, it facilitated middle-class abandonment of the city.

In the 1970s, scholars began to trace New York City’s problems back to Robert Moses. Moses was a master builder; more than any other individual, he had the single greatest impact on the City’s
landscape. He used his unelected positions to facilitate the building of parks, highways, bridges, playgrounds, housing, tunnels, beaches, zoos, civic centers, exhibition halls and the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.

Although he was once lauded as the man who could get things done, by the 1960’s, Moses was seen as a destroyer of neighborhoods. According to Robert Caro, Moses was responsible for displacing more than half a million people. Between 1946 and 1956, while he was building highways, Lincoln Center, the United Nations and several college campuses, he was responsible for the dislocation of more than 320,000 individuals.38 A disproportionate number of those individuals were black, Hispanic and poor. This was all done in the name of urban renewal and it subsequently changed the demographics of New York City and the Bronx.

Moses led the largest slum clearance programs in the 1950’s.39 As chairman of the Mayor’s Committee on Slum Clearance, he used Title I of the U.S. Housing Act of 1949 to facilitate the change he imagined. To Moses, anything old was a slum and slums were to be demolished so new life could flourish. Even if the old walk-ups were perceived as substandard, the people who lived there saw them as home.40 His vision destroyed people’s homes. Moses obtained planning grants for 32 urban renewal projects.41 These projects weakened the social fabric of Bronx neighborhoods.

Housing was torn down to make way for his projects. “The dispossessed, barred from many areas of the city by their color and their poverty, had no place to go but into the already overcrowded slums—or into ‘soft’ borderline areas that then became slums, so that his ‘slum clearance programs’ created new slums as fast as they were clearing the old.”42 Caro blamed Moses for the ghettoization of the city. The process of slum clearance ended up dividing the city by color and income.

At the time, Moses seemed like the perfect villain. In their account of New York’s decline, Jack Newfield and Paul Dubrul agreed with Robert Caro. “The deepest historical roots of New York’s fiscal crisis go back to Robert Moses and the creation of public authorities in 1934.”43
THE BRONX IN TRANSITION

Between 1920 and 1950, the population of the Bronx doubled. New residents looked for affordable, decent housing in a stable community with access to public transportation. In the 1930s, the image of The Bronx was positive. It was seen as a borough of neighborhoods. Its overwhelming Jewish character was positively portrayed in movies and radio. This image was fostered by *The Jazz Singer* and *The Goldbergs*. It was the home of the Yankees – the envy of every baseball fan.

Jews along with their Irish, Italians, African American, and Puerto Rican neighbors shared middle-class values. In an era of hard times and economic uncertainty, life in the Bronx exuded an air of constancy. The borough was a place where working people enjoyed the simple pleasures of everyday life. There was a neighborhood feeling to the Bronx, even in densely populated areas. Nostalgic scenes of the New York and the Bronx are easily pictured. Children playing in the streets where one self-appointed woman watched over them, warning to tell their parent if she saw them doing wrong. Hot summer nights with residents congregated on stoops. People sitting in front of their buildings and playing cards.

This post-card picture of the Bronx began to change after World War II. With veterans returning and the birth rate rising, the housing shortage in the city was more critical than ever. Despite the shortage, it was politically expedient to maintain rent control policies. Although the Bronx was a borough filled with high-class apartment buildings, some with gloved doormen, the quality of the housing stock began to deteriorate. This was due to the squeeze rent control placed on landlords. With their incomes frozen, most landlords provided only deferred maintenance; they fixed immediate problems but let general upkeep wane. As buildings cut back on services and general conditions deteriorated, long-time Bronx residents began to leave for the nearby suburbs of Westchester County. As people left, their former residences were occupied by individuals and families that were significantly poorer. And, because they
were mostly black and Puerto Rican, they became the scapegoat for what was happening to the Bronx. An additional sign of things to come was the closing of the once daily Bronx newspaper *Home News.*

The building of the Major Deegan and the Cross Bronx Expressway, both projects of Robert Moses, made the move to the suburbs that much easier. In addition to facilitating suburban flight, the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway destroyed neighborhoods. Its sheer scale scared and obliterated whole neighborhoods. Demolition and excavation required to build the Cross Bronx Expressway created tremendous havoc in the surrounding streets. Construction generated mountains of rubble crawling with rats and roaches. Dynamite shook buildings and coated them with dust and debris. As buildings emptied out, vagrants and winos moved in. Ordinary neighborhoods were transformed into ruins. Even residents who did not lose their apartments were affected. Adjacent apartments that had been settled and stable for 20 years emptied out. Ninety-six buildings were raised in the lower Bronx for a total of 12,486 apartments. Approximately 60,000 working class people, mostly Jews, along with Irish, Italians and blacks lost their homes. In the process, Moses created refugees and destabilized the Bronx. The Bronx was a victim of urban renewal and its assumed progress.

**MTICHELL-LAMA: CO-OP CITY PLANNED and BUILT**

At the end of World War II, both Western Europe and Japan were a bombed out. The economic and moral strength of the U.S. led it to victory. In the two decades after the war, the U.S. would remain an economic powerhouse. Post-war prosperity engendered new desires. The American Dream changed. Spacious apartments near public transportation were replaced by home ownership in the suburbs. Cars replaced subways.

The true extent of this change began to appear in the 1960’s. Nowhere was the change more apparent than in city centers. Since World War II, Americans had been on the move and in search of a better life. Facilitating that search was the GI bill, the national highway system, and the effects of redlining. Returning vets went to college and moved their families to the suburbs. People could now
afford cars and the new highways led them out of the city. In the suburbs, they could purchase their own homes with mortgages subsidized by the FHA. Urban centers experienced white-flight. By the mid 1970’s, Midwestern cities became the rustbelt and the nation’s largest city had to be bailed out by its public unions.

Looking back more than 30 years, neither New York City nor the Bronx is a poster child for urban decay. It is clear that New York’s experience was different from other cities such as Detroit. Yet in the late 1970s, many believed that New York was on its deathbed. It is hard to remember what New York City was like in 1970’s; it seems like an apparition. The Bronx was embodiment of the urban problems. Many at the time believed that stemming the tide of white flight would save the city.

In 1955, the Limited Profit Housing Companies Act or Mitchell-Lama was passed for the purpose of building affordable housing for middle-income residents of New York State. Many believed that Mitchell Lama would “play a big part in arresting the exodus of families from the cities to the neighboring suburbs.”50 Encouragement of private development was its purpose. Apartments were needed for middle-income families who could not afford housing at market prices and were too affluent for public housing. At the time, the Legislature explicitly stated that the lack of acceptable, affordable housing in cities constituted “an emergency and a grave menace to the health, safety, morals, welfare and comfort of citizens of this state”51 and created the program to encourage private companies to address this need.

Like the 1926 Limited Dividends Housing Companies Act, tenant-owners would buy apartments for a modest down-payment and make monthly payments. And when they left, they would sell the apartments back to the sponsor for their initial equity; in some cases with interest. The apartments were valued for their ongoing use rather than their potential speculative value as a commodity. In addition, Mitchell-Lama gave developers tax breaks and low interest loans. In some cases, the housing companies manage the day-to-day operations of the projects.
The Mitchell-Lama law gave the City the power of condemnation and the use eminent domain to clear slums. This enabled private builders to build middle class housing. The cooperative would replace the slum. Families would subsequently be invested in their apartments. As cooperators, they were no longer merely tenants. It would give city dwellers a chance to live the suburban dream in urban confines. Cooperative housing would provide an escape from the blight of slums and the deteriorating neighborhoods of New York City. Slums were a cancer endangering the very survival of the city. Slum clearance was a necessary operation to keep the City alive. Humans need open spaces, air and light. Mitchell-Lama’s largest project, Co-op City would provide all three. Co-op City would be the Bronx’s answer to urban decay.

Co-op City was the birth child of Robert Moses. He saw it as a cure for the malignancy of the urban slum. His dream of a “unified, comprehensive housing program” was under attack. The furor over the evictions he endorsed was an impediment to his desire for continual urban renewal. The solution was to build where no one lived. As new buildings were built, people would be moved out of their slum. Those areas cleared of tenants would be razed and a new development would then be built. The process would continue until all the city’s slums were replaced. At the groundbreaking ceremonies, Robert Moses called Co-op City and cooperatives the hope of slum clearance and Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller called it “a spectacular and heart-warming answer” to the problems of American cities. They thought they were ushering in a new era and that Co-op City would be the answer to the problems troubling the urban landscape.

Moses dreamed big and Co-op City is nothing if not big. Like its predecessor Freedomland, the numbers tell the story. Co-op City is divided into five sections. Sections one to four are contiguous and section five is separated by the Hutchinson River Parkway. Co-op City was built on 300 acres of swampland. The marsh was made into dry by bringing in five million cubic yards of hydraulic fill (sand) from Pelham Bay by boat and then pumping it through a pipe 26-inches in diameter and 3 miles long,
which raised the entire area by 14 feet.\textsuperscript{56} It was supported by 50,600 pilings extending down into
bedrock. The first building erected was a huge power plant and “from it spread 170 miles of heating and
air conditioning piping and 112 miles of hot water piping.”\textsuperscript{57} There are 35 high rise building and 236
three-story townhouses. There are four building configurations: 10 structures in the 26-story Triple Core
style, which has 3 entrances and 500 units; 10 in the 24-story Chevron style, with 414 units; 15 in the
Tower style, which has 33 stories and 384 units; and the 7 town-house clusters. They provided more than
19 million square feet of living space. One hundred and twenty thousand pounds of reinforced steel were
erected. Masons laid 15 million bricks and 2.5 million cinder blocks.\textsuperscript{58} There were enough bathroom
tiles to build a wall five feet high from New York City to St. Louis Missouri.\textsuperscript{59}

Totaling 15,372 residential units, the residences have 130,000 windows, 4,000 terrace doors, 179
elevators and 8 garages designed to hold more than 10,000 cars. The complex also has 15 houses of
worship, six nursery schools and day care centers. It has a 121 person security force. This \textit{city within a
\textit{city}} has three shopping centers with a total of about 150 stores and 40 offices rented by doctors, lawyers
and other professionals. Each center has a supermarket, a barber shop, clothing stores, a dry cleaner, a
pharmacy, fast food shops, a Chinese takeout, a greengrocer and an auditorium that is used for cultural
and private events.\textsuperscript{60}

There is a 60-acre greenway. The buildings themselves only take up twenty percent of the land,
the rest is park. There are four basketball courts, and five baseball diamonds. In addition, Co-op City has
its own education park. The education park houses three elementary schools, two middle schools and one
high school. Within these schools, there is a weather station, fourteen gymnasiums, two swimming pools,
a planetarium and a Museum of Migrating Peoples.\textsuperscript{61}

Co-op City was shaped by social need and idealism. Union ideals came from Abraham Kazan
who had helped to build the Amalgamated Houses in the northeast Bronx in 1927. Under his leadership,
in 1951, sixty-two labor union and civic groups united to form the United Housing Foundation (UHF).
Their goal was to build and promote cooperative housing. With political support, UHF started construction on Co-op City in 1965. UHF formed a wholly owned subsidiary, Community Services Inc., to build the complex. The complex would then be managed by Riverbay Corporation.

For Co-op City to become a reality and fulfill its dream, the project required the right architect. That architect was Herman Jessor. As a Russian immigrant, Jessor’s architectural philosophy embodied the hopes and dreams of eastern European Jews. His work epitomized the socialist ideals of liberty and equality embraced by the cooperative movement. During his career, Jessor designed over 40,000 limited-equity cooperative apartments for New York City’s working families including the Amalgamated Houses. He supported slum clearance and the tower-in-the-park of Le Corbusier.

Le Corbusier’s words serve as an inspiration for Co-op City.

Suppose we are entering the city by way of the Great Park, . . . Our fast car takes the special elevated track between the majestic skyscraper: as we approach nearer, there is seen the repetition against the sky of the twenty-four skyscrapers; to our left and right on the outskirts of each particular area are the municipal and administrative buildings; and enclosing the space are the museums and university buildings. The whole city a Park.

Le Corbusier wanted to design housing that rejected class and economic position. He envisioned a city that would foster maximum individual liberty. He also wanted his designs to alleviate the strain of living in overcrowded cities. He incorporated the ideas of the Garden City popularized in London. Le Corbusier envisioned a vertical Garden City; his skyscrapers within a park would make the Garden City practical for high density living. Le Corbusier imagined the vertical city with 1,200 inhabitants per acre, but because the buildings were so high, 95 percent of the grounds would remain open. The automobile was an integral part of his plan. His designs included great arterials roads. Most importantly, his designs stressed simplicity and harmony. Le Corbusier called New York a beautiful catastrophe and wanted to remake into New York City into *La Ville Radieuse*. His Radiant City was the inspiration for Co-op City’s design.
Their size notwithstanding, the towers of Co-op City does not overpower. Buildings are dispersed. There is an abundance of greenspace, pathways, playgrounds, gardens and benches. It is Le Corbusier’s vision come to life.

**LIFE IN CO-OP CITY - THE MOVE IN**

Tenant owners, known as cooperators, began to move into Co-op City in December of 1968; initial occupancy would continue until March of 1972. In August of 1972, there were more than eight thousand families on the waiting list.

People came; whole neighborhoods picked up and moved to Co-op City. “There was a distinct promise and a lot of excitement among families that were relocating to Co-op City.” Arthur Taub remembered, “in those years, there was basically nothing here . . . no sidewalks, no traffic lights, no bus stops, no stores. My wife had to push a shopping cart through sand down to this co-op supermarket they had set up in the garage. Everywhere, the ground was just sand that had been dredged from the bottom of Gravesend Bay and pumped in from Orchard Beach in a pipe three miles long. There were still seashells in it, lying around.” Early residents like Arthur Taub were willing to put up with a lot because “Co-op City offered big apartments, great views, walk in closets, parquet floors, free heat and utilities.”

Co-op City became a haven for those escaping deteriorating neighborhoods. People moved there because it was the right kind of neighborhood. Janice Hotez Goldstein remembers:

Many of the original residents of Co-op City were Jewish, Italian and Irish. Their ‘old’ neighborhoods had ‘changed’ and I think most families were happy to be moving to a ‘new’ predominantly Jewish, Italian and Irish community that was being built . . . Many families were fleeing their old neighborhoods because they were getting bad. I used to hear other parents say their neighborhoods were ruined by Puerto Ricans, others would blame the blacks. Neighborhoods and streets had become dirty and dangerous, some had changed very little, yet parents feared the worst and
ran. Muggings and fear of muggings was rampant. So families needed a place to run to. The suburbs were too far and/or too expensive for many lower middle & middle class families.70

Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor’s recounts her family’s decision to move to Co-op City.

My mother was eager to get us into a safer place because the Bronxdale projects were headed downhill fast. Gangs were carving up the territory and each other . . . A plague of arson was spreading through the surrounding neighborhoods as landlords of crumbling buildings chased insurance. Home started to look like a war zone.

. . . Yes, Co-op City was the ends of the earth, but once I saw the apartment, it made sense. It had parquet floors and a big window in the living room with a long view. All the rooms were twice the size of those cubbyholes in the projects, and the kitchen was big enough to sit and eat in.71

While many moved into Co-op City to get away from intolerable neighborhoods, others came to participate in the development of a different kind of community. Co-op City’s most important feature, according to its management was its “spirit of cooperation” and the chance to build anew. Co-op City would be like no other large city in history. The tenants would become cooperators. They would manage as a collective and flourish.72

Although the social contract of Co-op City was a socialist dream, most people came because it offered them a better life for themselves and their families. In the pages of Co-op City Times, Lorraine Holtz wrote that “Co-op City is a beautiful place . . . not only is it a housing development but Co-op City is really a way of life. . . . We lived in neighborhoods where landlords stopped taking care of their buildings, community services were not available and families started moving out. . . We moved to the last oasis left to middle income families in the City of New York.”73 In speaking to many former residents the picture become clear, Co-op City offered “safe, affordable housing and a family oriented community,”74 and “trees!”75

Co-op City was an ideal place to raise a family.
Being able to walk outside and always find friends to be with. Having acres of land to safely ride a bicycle, playing paddle-ball, being able to walk to the shopping center with a variety of different types of stores and restaurants. As a teenager growing up in Co-op City, it was great. There were always kids around outside and we could get around on our own without needing transportation from our parents. It literally was a self-contained city with its own schools, supermarkets, restaurants, community center and transportation.\textsuperscript{76}

More importantly, Co-op City offered large spacious apartments with light and air. Most apartments had more than one exposure. Buildings were placed so that residents had a true feeling of privacy, even with 60,000 other residents. “Our three bedroom apartment was spacious and had a view of the Hutchinson River and the Long Island Sound in the distance. On a clear day, we thought we could see forever. We had central a/c which was a big deal and parquet wooden floors.”\textsuperscript{77}

It took time, but Co-op City became a community. Early residents remembered the transition.

Although, like most new projects, especially one of this magnitude, Co-op City wasn’t ready for us. There were many construction delays and bureaucratic red tape that delayed things. Schools were not built in time, so students had to take buses to schools outside Co-op City. Some younger kids were taught in temporary structures on the site where schools were to be built. Eventually, everything seemed to come together, especially its people. Parents made new friends and socialized. Kids made new friends, many of whom became lifelong friends.\textsuperscript{78}

Co-op city gradually transformed from a construction site to a community. When the harshest days of winter had passed, you could see young couples strolling, little kids playing, senior citizens watching from the benches. …you saw people of every imaginable background, drawn from across the five boroughs, a slightly more prosperous population than we were used to in the projects: teachers, police officers, firefighters, and nurses. …The buildings were pristine and flawless then . . . The grounds were landscaped with trees and flowers, and the whole place lit up at night.\textsuperscript{79}

Co-op City became a place where strangers became friends. It truly became a city-within-a-city. “Everything you wanted was there.”\textsuperscript{80} Co-op City enjoyed at least 200 community organizations.\textsuperscript{81}
People’s lives were enriched by the services provided. Perusing the pages of *Co-op City Times*, the variety and breath of activities offered is considerable. They included lectures, seminars, bowling club, Co-op City summer camp, counseling services, mens’ clubs, Golda Meir Club, ORT, Hadassah, Kadima, Spanish-American Club, Tel Aviv Club, Black Caucus, building committees, and election committees to name a few. The executive manager, Edward A. Aronov eloquently wrote, “Where else in New York City do hundreds of people these days leave their apartments at night to go to meetings, lectures, concerts, dances at Community Centers or Community Rooms? Where else is there such a sense of security today? Where else is there so much sharing and working together for one or another community purpose?” On paper, it looked like the dream was becoming a reality.

**LIFE IN CO-OP CITY – TRANSPORTATION**

To get to Co-op City is an adventure. Intrepid travelers can take the number 5 train to Baychester Avenue and walk about a mile over Interstate 95. A subway stop was originally planned for Co-op City, but due to cost, it never materialized. Most people travel in and out of Manhattan via Express Bus service. Over the years, there has been discussions about building a monorail and most recently about building a Metro North Stop. Despite this inconvenience, most residents don’t seem to mind. The words were repeated over and over again, “Public transportation was readily available. We had to take city buses to get to all subways and trains, but we had express buses which took us into the city.” Perhaps this is why Co-op City became an oasis apart from the turmoil afflicting the rest of the Bronx.
Crossing over Interstate 95

photographed 1/21/2016
LIFE IN CO-OP CITY – *Co-op City Times*

Co-op City is so large that it had two newspapers devoted to its goings-on: *Co-op City Times* and *City News*. Only *Co-op City Times* survives as the voice of the cooperative. Reading through *Co-op City Times* from 1968 to 1978 the community comes to life. It is clear that this tenth largest city in the state was in actuality a small town. During this ten-year period, the majority of the cooperators were Jewish; *Co-op City Times* reflects the shtetl-like personality of the cooperative.

The paper reveals the community’s personality and quirks. Issues of concern were aired in the paper, sometimes for weeks on end. During the summer of 1970, there was an ongoing discussion about sitting in front of the building with lawn chairs. Some complained that the custom brought from the Lower Eastside was inappropriate for the new surroundings. They felt it created a beach-like atmosphere and made a negative impression on visitors. Others argued that it made the community safer and less sterile. And then, there were those who wanted the perpetrators fined because Co-op City was not a country club.\(^{84}\) This debate did not resonate with former residents interviewed. They did remember, young and old alike, sitting on the development’s benches and *kibitzing* just like they had in the old neighborhood.

Another incident aired over several weeks was over the closing of supermarkets during the Jewish high holidays. When it was reported that the supermarkets would be closed, Jewish cooperators responded; they felt uneasy with this decision.\(^ {85}\) They did not want their beliefs inflicted on other people. Even the most observant Jews were adamant that their religious beliefs not be used to discriminate against anyone wanting to shop. Their desire for a new kind of community was clearly visible. The issue was resolved; one supermarket would remain open during the holidays.

Although the design of the paper changed more than once, its basic format remained the same. The front pages dealt with serious issues facing the cooperative, while the inside was primarily devoted to community activities. Concerns about transportation, security, teenagers and education were reported.
Mundane events like Tupperware parties and little league tryouts were posted. Some notable sections included were *Happenings*, *This Week at Co-op City*, *In the Consumer’s Corner*, *The New Newspaper* (designed to appeal to teenagers), *Community Bulletin Board*, *News in Brief*, *Designing Women*, *Caring for your Car*, *Letters to the Editor*, and *Classifieds*. The paper contained crossword puzzles, TV listings, and horoscopes. And, it was filled with advertisements, especially the Co-op Supermarket sales of the week.

The newspaper was also used to educate the community about how to live in a cooperative. An article entitled the “Do’s & Don't’s of Cooperative Living” pointed out matters regarding loitering, keeping lobbies clear, and the use Liquid Plummer rather than Drano to clean pipes. Since the tenants were now owners, the upkeep of the building mattered. Understanding the characteristics of a cooperator’s responsibilities was made clear.

A good cooperator:
1) Closes his door and never lets its slam.
2) Closes his compactor/incinerator room door and never lets that slam.
3) Picks up any garbage that he may have dropped when he puts it down the chute.
4) Hold his cigarette/match/cigarette pack while he is in the elevator and deposits same in the trash receptacle in the lobby or in his apartment.
5) Never argues with any co-op employee. He speaks to his floor captain or building chairman if he has a complaint.
6) Posts no makeshift signs anywhere.
7) Discusses with his children the problems of vandalism and graffiti
8) Never fights with another cooperator. He speaks to his floor captain or chairman to talk it out.
9) Reports all incidents of vandalism, etc. to either Security, his floor captain or building chairman.
10) Tries to be informed by attending as many meetings as he can.
11) Avoids pressing elevator buttons more than once.
12) Never allows his young child to use the elevator alone.
13) Tells his child the dangers of walking on or near the railroad tracks.
    With mild weather upon us, he talks to him NOW.
14) Tells his guests not to bring their dogs to Co-op City.
15) Locks his patio door and windows when he leaves his apartment and when he retires for the evening.
16) Does not press door button to allow anyone in unless he is absolutely sure who it is.
17) Avoids walking on lawn grass.
18) Discusses with his children the problem of bicycle riding in Co-op City. He insists that his child does not ride his bike in prohibited areas. Besides causing injuries, the parent of the child can be sued.
19) Does not smoke in the elevator.
20) Deposits wet garbage only in the chute. All other garbage-newspapers, bottles cartons are to be brought to the basement.
21) Informs his visitors and children to abide by the above.

The paper was also used to respond to attacks from outsiders, and other newspapers and magazines. During the rent strike (to be discussed), Co-op City Times was used to galvanize the community. Although many complained that it was a tool of the Riverbay Corporation and its management, in retrospect this is a half-truth. The paper both railed against the rent strike and provided information to cooperators about the strike. The paper allowed itself to be criticized and it aired its dirty laundry. The editors of the paper freely printed these attacks. Two such entries show that the paper did its best to report what was happening.

I would like to comment on your newspaper. There have been many incidents in Co-op City which you did not print in this paper. I won’t talk about them because if I do you probably won’t print this letter. Although I have lived here only five months, I have learned a lot about this place. I also would like to say that Co-op City Times is a one-sided paper, showing only the good side of Co-op City. There is a bad side too. It should be brought out in your paper to make the cooperators aware of it and to enable them the chance to correct it.  

I publicly accuse the Co-op City Times in collusion with Management, of purposely misleading this community in order to demoralize the residents and thereby destroy our efforts to fight the pending 33 percent increase. They have purposely distorted the facts and have made totally unfounded statements in the guise of neutral reporting of an Advisory Council meeting. 

In order to clarify their position and to appear to be unbiased in its reporting on important issues, the editorial board listed the following guidelines.
(1) News and articles must be of a direct interest to Co-op City. Happenings, persons, issues, must be based on Co-op City residents.

(2) Official announcements, statements, or actions of official bodies and officials of Co-op City and management notices are given prominent display.

(3) The paper is open to all opinions with due concern for propriety or libel.

(4) To the extent possible, the paper avoids printing a story or letter that has already appeared in the City News.

(5) The paper will print only one release from an organization in a given issue.

(6) The paper will publish samples of pro and con opinions on a given subject, not all contributions that are submitted.

(7) The Editorial Board will not continue a debate indefinitely but will discontinue publishing contributions on a given subject when in its judgment the matter has been explored fully and nothing new is being added.

(8) The editorial board reserves the right to edit contributions.

(9) Letters to the Editor are limited to a maximum of 300 words approximately. The paper avoids printing purely personal letters.

(10) The Times will not publish personal attacks either in letters to the Editor or in articles.

Challenges, aside, Co-op City Times continues to be the voice of the cooperative.

LIFE IN CO-OP CITY – ETHNIC DIVERSITY and RACE

From its inception, race and ethnicity was an issue. Most cooperators valued and hoped for integration and diversity. In practice, this goal was never fully realized.

From the beginning, there were misgivings that the complex would limit or exclude blacks and Hispanics. UHF assured all concerned that they intended to make sure that minorities knew that they were welcomed.91

Cooperators hoped that blacks and whites would “would overcome their fears and live together [rather than] feed the flames of racism and separatism.”92 They wanted this experiment to be a source of redemption from the burning urban landscape.
In truth though, “When you moved here, you moved your prejudices in with your furniture.” To address prejudice and fear of social change, a six part lecture series was presented. It was entitled *A Perspective On Radical Social Change.* Education was one tool that could help foster acceptance and change negative attitudes. Co-op City could not become an inclusive community unless it confronted race. Understanding how identity politics was altering society would contribute to setting Co-op City apart from the rest of the Bronx.

An early concern was minority representation on the Advisory Council. Minority, black and Puerto Rican cooperators insisted that their voices be included. This was openly discussed in the pages of *Co-op City Times.* For many it was hard to see why minorities needed what was perceived as *special* representation. In the end, fears of supplanting the democratic process gave way to finding a practical solution to ensure suitable minority presence on the Council.

Co-op City boasted three major Black organizations: The Co-op City Black Caucus, the Concerned Black Cooperators, and the Co-op City Branch of the National Council of Negro Women. Their meetings, events and celebrations were well publicized.

Most of the majority Jewish cooperators saw no difference between themselves and their non-Jewish counterparts. Black families moved to Co-op City for the same reasons as everyone else. They wanted a better life for their families. They wanted a good education for their children. Blacks believed that being in a Jewish community would ensure their acceptance and that they would be able to share in the ideals of the cooperative. They were excited by the prospect of participating in creating a new community, and hoped that the fears and prejudices that clouded other neighborhoods would be left behind.

Despite this optimistic view, rumors abound regarding what really happened. After the rent strike was over, the New York Urban League’s Open Housing Center sent a letter to the Governor charging that the new (post-strike) tenant management group was practicing “blatant discriminatory practices.” They
feared that the new management was in the process of establishing criteria that would ensure 70/30 ratio of white to black.

The charges were disputed and dropped. In truth, the new board was committed to addressing previous management policies that had led to the concentration of the development’s minority families in certain sections of Co-op City rather than their dispersal throughout the development. Common speculation was that charges of racial discrimination had been raised early on by the NAACP. In order to avoid a legal battle, the development was opened to more minorities. Given that sections one through four were filled; the majority of blacks ended up in Section five.

Most residents did not believe there was discrimination against blacks and Puerto Ricans. The real issue was that most minority families could not afford the initial investment. Because of this, cooperators worried that apartments would be bought by the City and the State and used to house welfare recipients. This question was emphatically denied by management. Cooperators had just left neighborhoods on the decline and they did not want to see the same thing happen again.

There is no readily available information in the public record to support claims made by some former residents, but many believed that the NAACP or other such organizations bought apartments for black and Puerto Rican welfare families. This was probably because crime was on the rise and that rise was blamed on the growing minority population. This is only conjecture. Perhaps it was just that the problems facing the rest of the Bronx caught up with Co-op City. The real reason for the change was probably due to many other factors: original residents died, their children moved away and individuals retired to warmer climes.

In retrospect the dream of a truly integrated community was not achieved. The population was approximately 75% Jewish when it opened and current statistics reflect the change that took place in the Bronx since the 1960s.
New York City demographic shifts, 2000 to 2010
Center for Urban Research, The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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LIFE IN CO-OP CITY - STRUCTURAL DEFECTS

The dream of Co-op City was threatened by its shoddy construction. From the start there were problems. The winds that blew during construction were unprecedented. Fires broke out requiring a super-pumper be brought in to take water from the Hutchinson River. First aid workers took care of 175 worker injuries per month. This was a construction job that was supposed to cost $250 million, but actually cost $436 million.

The real problem was that it was built on a landfill and the ground began sinking. This resulted in gas leaks all over the complex. Eventually all the gas lines had to be replaced. Shifting landfill was responsible for shearing off electrical cables. Sinking and buckling sidewalks were common. Parking garages had to be closed because the concrete was crumbling and the structural steel was protruding. In addition, some buildings were built without the reinforcing bars needed to make them safe.

Although his apartment had no construction issues, one former resident was told that his building was tilting and that weights were used to balance the building. Another resident remembers that garages and terraces were torn down and replaced. They remembered not being able to touch their windows during rainstorms, and that top floor apartments in many buildings were uninhabitable and unrepairable due to construction defects.

It was charged that “Co-op City was put together with “spit, glue and graft. Not enough spit and glue. But plenty of graft.” The most stinging indictment comes from the pages of *The New Yorker*. 
In the construction of Co-op City, mistakes were made. Substandard materials, in certain instances, were used. Shoddy workmanship was allowed. Buildings were faced with bricks so porous and so poorly pointed that rainwater came through when storms hit them straight on. Apartments on the very top floors were roofed imperfectly, and cracks large enough that occupants could look up and see the sky were revealed. Landfill that was supposed to be laid down so as to prevent excessive settling did not have that done. Expensive pipes and ducts whose manufacturer warned that they must not be left out in the weather were. Construction materials from the site were removed without authorization and not returned. Entire mansions up in Westchester County (people say) were built with materials stolen from Co-op City. In many and widely scattered bank accounts, construction funds were secreted. Fortunes, probably, were gained. Estimated figures for the project's cost were revised upward, from two hundred and ninety-three to three hundred and forty to, finally, four hundred and fifty million dollars. These and other events of the project's construction are described more accurately in the passive voice than in the active, because in a practical, legal sense they were the acts of nobody: not a single company that did construction work on Co-op City remained in existence a year or two after the project was done.  

106

It is no wonder that tenant owners were upset by ever increasing carrying charges. Mismanagement and corruption led cooperators to protest and strike.

THE STRIKE

On June 29, 1976, 7,000 resident gathered on the greenway of Co-op City and jubilantly cheered when Charles Rosen, chairman of the Steering Committee III, announced that the 13-month rent strike was over. During the strike, eighty-percent of the residents held back their monthly maintenance payments, amounting to more than $20 million.  

107

Co-op City’s strike was analogous to its size. This strike was the longest and largest in United States history.  

108 The strike reflected cooperator values. Residents believed that they were creating a miniature democracy. Members would work together in building the kind of community they wanted.  

109 Many resident thought that “by moving [to Co-op City they] became part of a collective and assumed a collective responsibility for its accomplishments and failures.  

110” Execute manager, Edward Aronov
shared these sentiments: “Co-op City was conceived as a cooperative community.” These words would come back to haunt him and other executives of the Riverbay Corporation as the residents of Co-op City banded together against what they saw as unfair and exorbitant increases in their monthly carrying charges.

When Co-op City opened, a six-room 3 bedroom apartment cost $2,700 with monthly charges of $149. A $250 million loan and the cooperators’ equity contribution of $32 million provided the initial financing for the project. Due to miscalculations, union strikes and inflation, construction costs rose from the original projection of $258.7 million to $390 million. The original maintenance and carrying charges of $27.32 per room rose to $31.71 in 1970, to $38.06 in 1973, and to $42.81 in July 1974. Feelings ran high. In the aftermath of the strike, Jules Honor clearly articulated what was at stake: “I had a strong feeling that Co-op City was a workable concept and was personally excited by it, but I was disillusion by its implementation. The rent increases would have undermined that concept, and so I felt that a great involvement on my part was necessary.”

The rising rents caused residents to take their first action in July of 1970. The Steering Committee filed complaints directed at the State Division of Housing for failure to issue a Certificate of Acceptability so that cooperators would have voting stock. Although the court ruled against them, this would not be their last time in court. Co-op City had numbers and in numbers, there is power.

Given the conditions that many cooperators endured, the rising rents added insult to injury. Many felt that they had been deceived and looked to the courts for a solution.

Continued dissatisfaction led the Steering Committee to retain the services of Louis Nizer. On September 23, 1972, he filed $110 million six-count complaint in Federal District Court against Community Services, UHF, the State of New York, the New York State Housing Finance Agency, eight officers of UHF and Community Services and Riverbay Corporation. The suit charged that the defendants violated the Securities and Exchange Act by circulating a false and deceptive prospectus in
order to lure 15,000 families into purchasing stock in the cooperative. The Nizer Case claimed that tenants had been lured to Co-op city on false pretenses. The complaint said that rents were kept artificially low to get people to move to a location with limited transportation and educational services. Nizer argued that Community Services had deliberately underestimated the cost to build the complex.

“According to the complaint, five increases in the construction price were agreed to between the builder and the owner without notice to the tenants between 1969 and 1972. These with related mortgage costs raised the monthly charge from $23.02 to $31.46 and that charges were to increase on July 1, 1974 to $42.47.117 The complaint also alleged that the UHF added $27 million for the construction a power plant that had never been used to produce electricity.

The issues regarding the power plant would be especially important due to rising energy costs. In the pages of Co-op City Times, Aronov noted that the primary cause for budget deficits expected for fiscal year 1975-1976 was due to increased energy costs. Fuel cost rose 221 percent, from approximately $2.3 million in 1973-1974 to $5.1 million in 1975-1976. Electric bills also doubled. Aronov reported that over $7 million of the budget deficit was due to high energy costs.118

According to the 1965 Information Bulletin, Co-op City was supposed to generate its own energy. But that did not happen. At the time, the generator would have only provided minimal savings and so an agreement was reached with Con Edison that would provide energy at special bulk rate. This agreement limited the Co-op City’s ability to generate its own power and accrue substantial savings. Given the oil embargo and skyrocketing prices the Power Plant was an especially upsetting issue.

The backdrop to the strike was the poor economic conditions of the 1970s. America was experiencing slow growth and increasing unemployment. Rising inflation and oil shortages exacerbated the problem. Additionally, New York was facing its worst fiscal crisis in history. The underlying problems facing Co-op City were no match for these larger issues. The development’s real long-term
problem, however, was that the series of increases in monthly charges was never sufficient to meet the operating costs and by the time of the strike, the development’s solvency was in question.

As concern over rising rents intensified, the Steering Committee began to formulate plans that would culminate in the rent strike. Buttressing their cause was their beliefs expressed by the Chairman of Steering Committee I, Al Abrams.

Organization, coordinated action and publicity, are the keys to victory in our struggle. . . . What the management of this community, and what some people living here don’t understand is that the majority of our people love living here. We have seen alternative housing, we have come from landlord-owned apartment and private home. For whatever the reasons, most cooperators here want to stay, want their children to grow up here and use these new schools, and want to spend their lives building this community. This rent increase strike is conceived as a way to build this community, for it will unite the largest numbers of concerned cooperators
in a concerted effort guaranteeing fair carrying charges. It will stabilized the community and establish security through waiting lists of prospective residents demanding homes here.\textsuperscript{119}

In August of 1974, the Steering Committee ran a practice rent strike. Cooperators gave their monthly checks to the Steering Committee and the Steering Committee gave the checks to Riverbay.\textsuperscript{120} In September, \textit{Co-op City Times} reported 84.5\% compliance. Nearly $3 million in 12,947 envelopes were collected. Six unobtrusive trash-can liners were turned over to Riverbay Corporation. This was a testament to the community’s ability to organize and a foreshadowing of things to come.\textsuperscript{121}

In response to this dress rehearsal, Harold Ostroff, executive Vice President of UHF wrote in \textit{Co-op City Times}:

The UHF does not own Co-op City and receives no financial benefits from its operations – only the residents’ benefit. If there were a rent strike, the residents would be striking against themselves, not against UHF or the State. If they do not provide the funds to pay their bills, then only their own services will suffer. We are concerned because we do not want to see Co-op City go bankrupt. This would harm no one except the residents of Co-op City and would not stop the need for increases to pay the inflationary bills.\textsuperscript{122}

Ostroff’s argument pointed to the clear dilemma that resident cooperators faced. They were technically the owners, but they really weren’t the owners. Their position was capricious. “They tell us when they want us to be tenants and when they want us to be owners.\textsuperscript{123}” They only owned a piece of the whole and did not have a say in management, maintenance or construction. But, how would Co-op City survive if they went on strike.

In November, Larry Dolnick, Vice Chairman of the Steering Committee made their position clear with regard to the Nizer Case and potential strike.

Co-op City is not a cooperative venture inasmuch as we do not have the legal right to govern ourselves and to determine our future. This business is run by outsiders who determine our day-to-day existence and all future plans. This business, which we all believed was a cooperative venture, deceived all of us upon moving here and, in fact we are collectively suing the sponsors and the State of New York.
We believe it is the right of all citizens to have decent, clean, stable homes for a price they can afford to pay. We all moved here believing that these were precisely the conditions which would prevail – after all, it was advertised and sold to us all as community for moderate-income working people and so agreed to by the sponsors and the state government. All we are demanding is precisely what we were sold, no more, no less.\textsuperscript{124}

As new increases of 25\% or $53.50 per room\textsuperscript{125} were announced, things came to a head. The five resident directors on the Riverbay Corporation’s Board of Directors resigned.\textsuperscript{126} In May, the Steering Committee promised to make all funds necessary to maintain a normal community life available to Riverbay Corporation. Only the portion earmarked for the payment of Co-op City mortgage obligations, state supervisory fees and taxes would be withheld from Riverbay Corporation.\textsuperscript{127} Riverbay never accepted any of these funds.

In the midst of the strike, the Nizer Case was lost. In June of 1975, the Supreme Court ruled that the stock purchased by prospective tenants in cooperative housing projects was not subject to Federal regulations and that shares in a cooperative are not stock subject to regulation by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).\textsuperscript{128} “The Court held that those people who chose to reside in Co-op City did not enter into agreements with Riverbay Corporation believing that the ‘stock’ they purchased was to be governed by federal securities law.”\textsuperscript{129} This loss did not end the strike.

The events of the strike played itself out on the pages of \textit{Co-op City Times}. An injunction was granted against the strike. The injunction stated that the strike was “imperiling the health safety and well-being of the residents by exposing them to imminent curtailment of vital services including sanitation, maintenance and security.”\textsuperscript{130} The Steering Committee “claimed that granting any relief to Riverbay would be a deprivation of the rights of the residents of Co-op City and a violation of their rights to due process.”\textsuperscript{131} The Judge also ruled that the offer to give a portion of the funds was in fact a “concession as to the immediacy of Riverbay’s plight . . . and that Riverbay has a right to free and unfettered collection
and use of the monthly carrying charges.” The Steering Committee disobeyed the injunction and refused to hand over any monies to Riverbay.

In August, the State started foreclosure proceedings on any Co-op City mortgages in default. In November, the members Steering Committee went on trial for contempt of court and were fined $1,000 per day. And still they refused to pay.

Articles criticizing the strikers appeared and were reproduced on the pages of *Co-op City Times*. Members of the community had their say as well. Don Phillips, the Co-op City Director of Education argued:

> . . the tragedy is that there is no longer any way to avoid substantial rent increases throughout the city. With or without massive rent strikes, New York faces almost catastrophic dislocation . . . Within the ever deepening economic, political and social chaos of New York City, the Co-op City rent strike has become a platform for fundamental political and economic changes and not merely for the immediate needs of our community.134

The strike finally ended with the help of then Secretary of State, Mario Cuomo. “The key provisions included: (1) immediate repayment of $15.1 million in mortgage obligations; (2) issuance of a limited certificate of acceptability to allow for the appointment of a resident Board of Directors to manage the development; (3) postponing any further foreclosure proceedings; (4) appointment of a task force to study the problems of the Mitchell Lama program; and (5) joint submission to the Federal Administration on Energy for a request to undertake a feasibility study regarding the conversion of the thermal plant to a total energy system.135"

The strike could not fix shoddy construction or the economics conditions facing New York City and the nation. In the end monthly charges had to be raised to cover the cost of running Co-op City. But in the process, the resident cooperators gained greater control of their community. In an interview with Jules Honor, one of the members of the Steering Committee, said that it had all been worth it. Although it
was a long hard struggle, things improved in Co-op City after the strike. The comradery created by the strike sustained the community for many year after.  

**THE BRONX AND CO-OP CITY**

The image of the Bronx changed drastically by the late 1960s. Its problems were immortalized in the movie, *Fort Apache, The Bronx* and in Jonathan Mahler’s *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx is Burning*. The borough was written off. The home of Yankee Stadium, Fordham University, the New York Botanical Gardens, and the Bronx Zoo had been devastated by redlining, slum clearance, the Cross Bronx Expressway, the Major Deagan, the Bruckner Expressway and Co-op City. Co-op City altered the demography of the borough, but how responsible was it for the waves of arson, crime, and housing abandonment that afflicted the Bronx. “After Co-op City was completed and fully established, I used to hear parents who remained in their “old” neighborhoods complain that Co-op City ruined the Bronx.”

On former resident of Co-op City hated to tell people where he lived. People would stare and look at him in a way that implied, “Oh you’re the ones that killed the Bronx.”

The charge was not unfounded. Although Co-op City was supposed to be the solution to white flight, it destroyed whole neighborhoods as people moved out in mass. Even people who had not originally intended to move, made the move because they didn’t want to be the only ones left behind.

Every weekend during the 1960s, it seemed moving vans lined the Grand Concourse with people leaving for the newly opened Co-op City.

As early as 1966, *The New York Times* ran articles that became a self-fulfilling prophecy. A front page story, “Grand Concourse: Hub of the Bronx is Undergoing Ethnic Changes,” conveyed the disheartening news that Co-op City had received five thousand applications from the Concourse. In time, many blamed Co-op City for turning the once Grand Concourse into a ghost town.

Despite the feeling that Co-op City had served as a huge vacuum sucking out the white middle-class from the heart of the borough, most housing experts agree that Co-op City merely heightened
awareness of the deeper problem of white and middle-class flight from the city. Perhaps Co-op City hastened the decline, but there is no proof that it caused it.

The problems facing the Bronx were bigger than even Co-op City. In *The Abuse of Power*, Jack Newfield and Paul Dubrul ask, “How does a city die? . . . What are the terminal symptoms?” Their answer is quite stark. “More than a million citizens on welfare. A $13 million paper debt. A decline in population of more than three hundred thousand in four year. The loss of 450,000 manufacturing jobs in six years. Thirty thousand apartment units abandoned every year.”

They believed that crime, bad schools, poor housing had led large numbers to flee New York City. A smaller tax base and a budget crisis meant that there were fewer police and fire fighters, thus compounding the problem.

During the 1970s, the Bronx experienced organized, systematic burning. “Thirteen thousand fires broke out in 12 square miles of the South Bronx in 1975.” Abandonment was consuming the Bronx six to ten blocks a year. It is no wonder that people left. This was all happening while the City was going bankrupt with no reserve to deal with the depths of the problem.

Co-op City itself could not escape the changes taking place. Most of the original residents are gone. Many moved as the schools began to go down-hill and crime increased.

We began having some safety concerns approximately three to five years into living in Co-op City. As a young teenager, my sister sustained a concussion from being struck in the head while sitting outside one of the “Tower” buildings by an object that was thrown from a window. At age 19, I was attacked in my elevator by a boy who was raping and sodomizing women in Co-op City. I was able to escape, traumatized, but otherwise unharmed. Truman High School opened in Co-op City in time for my sister to attend. There were random and targeted physical attacks on white students by angry black students in the hallways and on the stairways. Racial tension was high in many public schools throughout the Bronx. Co-op City was not immune to this newer phenomenon in our schools. Co-op City was no longer the safe haven that so many families hoped for.

These changes shaped relationship between the Bronx and Co-op City.
CONCLUSION - THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

New York City, the Bronx and Co-op City have dramatically changed since the 1970’s and early 1980’s. The City has remade itself, the Bronx has come back from the abyss and the ethnic make-up of Co-op City is radically different. Notwithstanding, the fundamental nature of Co-op City remains the same. Walking through Co-op City today feels much the same as it did in the 1970’s.

The founders of Co-op City had big dreams. They wanted to remake society, maybe even create a socialist paradise. They wanted a community that was their own and one in which they could make their own way. Ultimately, the dream of Co-op City is the dream that most Americans share: liberty, freedom, equality of opportunity, a safe place to live and a chance to improve one’s life.

How many hopes and expectations were placed into this patch of Land? Co-op City was to be the New World for many, a chance to move into a neighborhood where people would care, would all live “cooperatively” together, free of crime, free from the changing neighborhoods of the other boroughs. A financial dream, too, was the motivation for many. The ways of co-ops were new to most; the promised cost of $450 per room in equity and estimated $25 per room monthly maintenance – incredible! 145

After the rent strike, things looked bleak. The co-op’s finances were a mess. When people moved out, they had to wait months to get their initial investment back. The vacancy rate was growing, and the larger problems of New York City threatened to tear the fabric of Co-op City apart. With all this, a survey (See Appendix) taken by City News in February of 1979, reveals what it meant to live in Co-op City. Even when 68% of those surveyed felt that Co-op City was changing for the worse and 80% felt that management was doing a poor job, 85% still enjoyed Co-op City as a place to live and 72% still believed it was a fine community in which to raise children.146

When asked, to a person, they believe Co-op City lived up to its promise. It was great when it was great. Looking back, it was a happy time in their lives.

There was a distinct promise and a lot of excitement among families that were relocating to Co-op City. Parents were looking forward to their kids attending Co-op City schools, playing in modern playgrounds behind their
buildings and paddleball courts that were located near the garages. It was a
time when many moms stayed at home and did not work. For our moms,
shopping was convenient and the fully equipped laundry rooms in the
basement of each building was a luxury many never knew before. I think
the overall promise of Co-op City was realized. Co-op City wasn’t perfect,
but I think it delivered on much of its promise for working families. I think
my parent’s expectations for the most part were fulfilled. Housing costs
remained affordable.\textsuperscript{147}

Driving down the Hutchinson River Parkway with sections one through four on the left and
section five on the right, one is struck by the enormity of the complex. But on foot, it is not quite so
daunting. Its design and layout delivered on Le Corbusier’s promise that the whole city would be a park.
Although critics complained that the buildings were ugly and reminiscent of the Soviet era housing, there
is beauty in their utility. People live inside, not outside and the interiors are bright and spacious. Architect
Herman Jessor’s response to attacks made by Jane Jacobs proves the point.

High-rise buildings were chosen because up to a certain height there is
economy in their construction. Also, with a limited area, the taller the
buildings, the greater the open spaces for a required number of housing
units. Since it is impossible in a city such as New York to give each family
a little house with a garden all round it, the best thing to do is to provide as
much open space as possible for the occupants of city buildings.\textsuperscript{148}

Co-op City is still considered a great place to raise a family. It is still affordable. Even now,
apartments cost between $13,500 and $29,250. The monthly maintenance fees range from $646 to
$1,394.\textsuperscript{149} In addition, according to \textit{Bronx Times}, the vacancy rate is .006\%. This is quite different from
25 years ago, when in over 10\% of the apartments were empty.\textsuperscript{150} For many, "this is the last decent
bastion of affordable housing left in New York City. . . .We have all races here and all religions, and
everyone gets along. The rest of America should work like this."\textsuperscript{151}

Recently, there has been some debate about placing Co-op City apartments on the open market.
The predominant feeling is that doing so would mean the abandonment of cooperative principles in favor
of the marketplace. Over the past decade, many Mitchell-Lama housing cooperatives across the City have
opted to “privatize” their buildings. This points to a larger shift in social consciousness. Some want to cash-in on their “good fortune,” but this is to the detriment of higher ideals. Individual gain would come at cost. To date, Co-op City’s residents have resisted the impulse to give in to market forces.

The story of a piece of land in the northeast Bronx is only partially told here, but the dreams dreamt here are big. The dreams expressed by Anne Hutchinson and the designers of Freedomland have found a home in Co-op City. Although it did not become a socialist paradise, Co-op City is a place where middle-income New Yorkers can live in quality housing surrounded by a strong community. It provides a home where dreams can grow. New York City is once again the greatest city in the world and the Bronx is no longer the poster child for urban decay. The future of Co-op City rests on the hopes and dreams of its cooperators.
## Appendix I
City News/Weekender Survey Results - *City News*, February 22, 1979  
(retyped from Bronx Historical Archival Records)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. How would you rate Co-op City as a Community?</th>
<th>18% Excellent</th>
<th>47% Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26% Fair</td>
<td>9% Poor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you feel the community has changed since you first moved into Co-op City?</td>
<td>10% Changed for the better</td>
<td>22% No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68% Changed for the worse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you consider to be the best thing about living in Co-op City? Check only one.</td>
<td>66% Your apartment</td>
<td>8% Community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2% Schools</td>
<td>3% Transportation</td>
<td>4% Safety and Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4% Other</td>
<td>4% Shopping convenience</td>
<td>9% Grounds, trees, grass, also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What do you consider to be the worst thing about living in Co-op City?</td>
<td>0% Your apartment</td>
<td>8% Community Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3% Schools</td>
<td>29% Transportation</td>
<td>60% Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you think the Board of Directors is effectively improving the quality of life in Co-op City? How would you rate the job the board is doing?</td>
<td>3% Excellent</td>
<td>18% Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48% Fair</td>
<td>32% Poor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How would you rate the maintenance department’s work? What kind of job do you think it is doing to keep Co-op City as a desirable place to live?</td>
<td>17% Excellent</td>
<td>44% Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28% Fair</td>
<td>11% Poor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How would you describe the condition of the public areas (halls and lobby) in your building?</td>
<td>13% Excellent</td>
<td>37% Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32% Fair</td>
<td>18% Poor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How would you rate the job of Co-Op City management?</td>
<td>4% Excellent</td>
<td>22% Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48% Fair</td>
<td>26% Poor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. How would you compare management today with management before the strike?</td>
<td>30% Changed for the better</td>
<td>35% No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35% Changed for the worse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you approve or disapprove of paying the president of the Riverbay Board of Directors?</td>
<td>30% Approve</td>
<td>59% Disapprove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11% No opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Do you think Co-op City is better or worse place to live because of the rent strike?</td>
<td>20% Better place to live</td>
<td>42% Worse place to live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28% No change</td>
<td>10% No opinion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Did you or a member of your family contribute to the Steering Committee during the rent strike?</td>
<td>77% Yes</td>
<td>23% No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Do you approve or disapprove of the Steering Committee spending money to campaign in the current Riverbay board election?</td>
<td>8% Approve</td>
<td>76% Disapprove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16% No opinion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. In what area do you think Co-op City should be improved?</td>
<td>15% Maintenance</td>
<td>3% Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18% Transportation</td>
<td>11% Shopping Centers</td>
<td>6% Community Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32% Management</td>
<td>15% Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Co-op City is a safe place to live.”</td>
<td>75% Agree</td>
<td>25% Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Have you enjoyed Co-op city as a place to live?</td>
<td>85% Yes</td>
<td>15% No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. How would you characterize your monthly carrying charges paid to Riverbay Corporation?</td>
<td>21% Too High</td>
<td>75% Reasonable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4% Inexpensive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: “Co-op City is a fine community in which to raise children.”</td>
<td>72% Agree</td>
<td>28% Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Would you urge your children to move into Co-op City?</td>
<td>49% Yes</td>
<td>51% No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. What is you major concern for the future of Co-op City? (check one)</td>
<td>27% Rent Increase</td>
<td>29% Changing neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29% Mortgage foreclosure</td>
<td>10% Vacant apartments</td>
<td>7% Inadequate maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19% Irresponsible community leadership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AFTERWORD

Although I grew up in Yonkers, I have a strong personal connection to the Bronx and Co-op City. My parents grew up in the Bronx, went to Evander Childs High School, met at a beatnik party in the Village, and were married in 1956 at the Rabbi’s house across the street from my grandmother’s apartment. Moreover, I taught at the Bronx High School of Science for 12 years.

As a child, I spent countless weekends visiting my grandmother and cousins who lived on Sedgwick Avenue. My mother’s sister and her family lived in a one bedroom apartment – my aunt and uncle converted the dining room into a bedroom and my cousins (2 sisters) shared the bedroom. My grandmother lived down the street in a large three bedroom apartment – at one time, my mother, my aunt, my grandmother and grandfather shared the apartment with my great grandparents.

In the 1971, my cousins moved from their small one bedroom apartment into a large three bedroom apartment in section four of Co-op City. Their bedrooms were so big – I was jealous. They had a magnificent view and air conditioning in the summer.

From the start, I loved Co-op City. I thought it was so much better than our garden apartment in Yonkers. My cousins had so many friends and they seemed so much more sophisticated than I was. Their life was so much more exciting than my own. I remember hanging out with them and being ticketed for loitering; it felt so cool. There always seemed to be something going on and I was happy to tag along.

Two years later my grandmother joined her friends and relatives and moved to section five. I don’t think she really wanted to move, but everyone was gone and I think she felt isolated. Also, her apartment was very big for one person – it wasn’t right for one person to have such a large apartment. I don’t remember her apartment, but I do remember going to the vestibule to ring up so she would come down, so could whisk her away. It was always very windy. I don’t think she like Co-op City very much. She was there a relatively short time. In 1978, only 5 years later, she moved to Florida.

In 1980, my aunt and uncle moved to Florida as well. I was supposed to move into their apartment with my cousin, but she moved to Gramercy Park before I graduated college in March of 1981, so I never got the opportunity to live in Co-op City.

On Thursday, January 21, I took the number 5 train from Nevins in Brooklyn to Baychester Avenue in the Bronx. It was over an hour train ride. I walked across I-95 and walked around the complex. It was too cold to walk all the way to Section 5. It was just as I remembered it. There was lots of space and every convenience imaginable. I still love the feel of the place. Busses circled the complex as I walked towards my cousins building. It was too bad I couldn’t go inside to see that view. The place was empty because of the cold. The liveliness I remember was missing.

All the same, Co-op City fascinates me. After living in Manhattan for 30 years, I can see its appeal; it just that it’s too damn far. The Bronx is making a comeback. It’s the last affordable place in New York City. It will be interesting to watch how the change will affect Co-op City.
3 Frazier.
4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
15 Alden.
19 "Freedomland to Become Apartmentland." Newsday Feb 10, 1965, p.5
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
26 Ultan, p. 239.
27 Ibid.
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29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
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Ultan, p. 260.
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Ultan, p. 259.
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Caro, p. 1151.
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74 Valerie Malmed, November 11, 2015.
75 Alan Honor, October 29, 2015.
76 Malmed.
77 Goldstein.
78 Ibid.
79 Sotomayor, p.127.
80 Steven Spivack, November 14, 2015.
81 Cheslow.
82 Co-op City Times, March 25, 1972.
83 Goldstein, Malmed, Honor, Spivak.
84 Co-op City Times, August 6 & August 11, 1970.
85 Co-op City Times, August 26, 1972.
86 Co-op City Times, March 18, 1972.
90 Co-op City Times, September 2, 1972.
92 Co-op City Times, May 9, 1970.
93 Ibid.
94 Co-op City Times, June 6, 1970.
95 Co-op City Times, May 16, 1970.
98 Ibid.
100 Co-op City Times. “Remembering and Honoring those who build Co-op City” by Ronald Meyers, September 17, 1977
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104 Goldstein.
106 Frazier.
111 Co-op City Times, March 25, 1972.
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113 Curran, p.i.
114 Curran, p.64.


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