

Roosevelt Island's Past: Does It Have a Future?

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By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

Six years ago, the distinguished preservation architect Giorgio Cavaglieri made a study of the assorted historic buildings on Roosevelt Island and concluded most of them were in "a condition suitable for reuse at an expense that was reasonable."

The idea of that study, Cavaglieri recalls, was to determine what remnants of the island's colorful history could be incorporated into the proposed new city "to achieve an architectural fix-ure."

At that time, the Landmarks Preservation Commission reportedly agreed quietly not to designate any of the buildings landmarks and to leave their preservation in the hands of the island's developer, the state's Urban Development Corp.

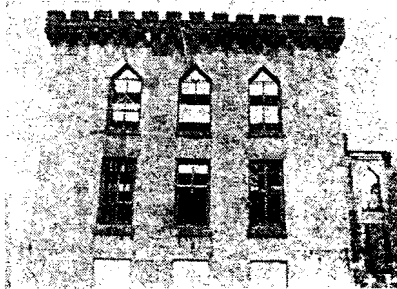
Now the commission is considering six buildings for designation—two of which are completely restored; two more are just about in ruins and the last two are somewhere in-between.

One building—the 19th-century five-story City Hospital with its mansard roof and stone facade which Cavaglieri says was in "mint condition" six years ago—is not even being considered. It has had three fires in the past few years, the copper roofing has been stolen, most of the roof has fallen in and vandals have had a general field day. The six buildings being considered are:

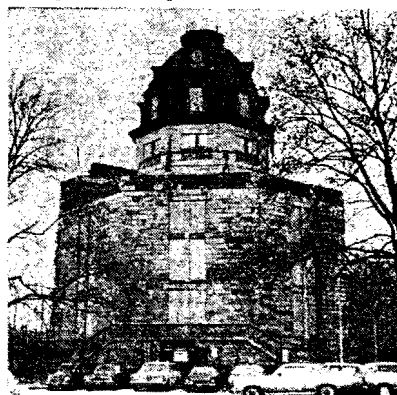
¶The Blackwell House, now restored, a modest wood-framed house built around 1800 for James Blackwell whose family had owned the island for more than a 100 years before he sold it to the city in 1828. It thereafter be-



Post Photos by Terence McCarten
Blackwell Farmhouse recently restored . . .



Small Pox Hospital a virtual ruin . . .



. . . and the Octagon, the next ruin?

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Is There A Future for Isle's Past?

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came the dumping ground for the city's poor, insane and sick and was renamed Welfare Island in 1921 and Roosevelt Island in 1970.

¶Small Pox Hospital, built in the 1850s and designed by James Renwick, architect of St. Patrick's Cathedral. The building partially collapsed during the 1969 study and its ruined state is clearly noticeable from the FDR Drive.

¶The Octagon was the central rotunda of the Insane Asylum built in 1839 whose dormitory wings were demolished several years ago.

¶The 1840s lighthouse, 50-foot high at the island's northernmost tip, was reportedly built by an asylum patient.

¶The 1888 Chapel of the Good Shepherd, now restored and set on an open site surrounded by new apartment houses, is reminiscent of an English parish church with Victorian Gothic detail.

¶The 1892 Strecker Memorial Laboratory, a simple two-story brick building that was at the time of construction one of the most complete laboratories in the country.

The six buildings were considered this week in a 13-item agenda of the commission's public hearing at City Hall. Diane Porter, chief planning officer for the Roosevelt Island Project, told the commission that there was not yet an official UDC position on the proposals.

'Landmarks Park'

Promotional material for the new city has shown plans for a "landmarks park" with the Small Pox Hospital, Strecker Laboratory and City Hospital included. Such plans also have included a Lighthouse Park and an Octagon Park.

But following the hearing, Miss Porter said that all those plans are now up in the air because of financial difficulties at UDC, whose own economic woes and near-default predated the city's current crisis.

Miss Porter added that if and when the second phase of the island is begun, "We'll probably take a new look" at those plans. But she added, "the next restoration project would be a low priority item."

Cavaglieri, known for his restoration designs of the Jefferson Market Library and New York Shakespeare Theatre, noted that it is no longer, "purely a dollar and cents issue. An urban design decision must first be made as to the character wanted for the island before anyone can determine if restoration is worthwhile."