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The Limits of Liberal Planning:
The Lindsay Administration’s Failed Plan to Control
Development on Staten Island

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The Limits of Liberal Planning
The Lindsay Administration’s Failed Plan to Control Development on Staten Island

Abstract: Staten Island grew rapidly after the Verrazano Narrows Bridge opened in 1964. Mayor John Lindsay introduced a plan to control and guide development there, and encouraged planned unit development. The Rouse Company, then building Columbia, Maryland, was contracted to plan new communities for the southern third of Staten Island to more than double the borough’s population. State Senator John Marchi introduced legislation for the South Richmond Development Corporation in 1971. The plan called for the city to use eminent domain to buy property and transfer it to the Rouse Company, which would also construct residential towers on landfill in Raritan Bay. Behind the banner of private property rights, the Conservative Party led opposition to the proposal, and their influence over elected officials on Staten Island led to the legislation’s defeat in Albany. Private development in South Richmond proceeded apace in the decades after without significant design or environmental constraints, or any master plan.

Keywords: John Lindsay; John Marchi; Rouse Company; Staten Island; South Richmond; planned communities; eminent domain; Conservative Party; planned unit development; new towns.

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The Limits of Liberal Planning
The Lindsay Administration’s Failed Plan to Control Development on Staten Island

The population of Staten Island rose steadily after the opening of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in 1964. Indeed, it was the only borough which gained population during the difficult decade of the 1970s, when rising crime rates and the sharp cuts in public services forced by the fiscal crisis suggested to some that the city had begun an irreversible decline.

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As Staten Island boomed, open space steadily gave way to new homes and subdivisions constructed by private builders. But there was no plan for the borough except the zoning map approved in 1961,¹ and because most of the new construction preceded the infrastructure – schools, streets and sidewalks, sewers, and parks – the city would be continually trying, and failing, to keep up with the needs of the growing borough for decades to come. In an effort to get ahead of this inevitable pressure, the administration of Mayor John Lindsay proposed a comprehensive plan for the sparsely inhabited southern third of Staten Island. The South Richmond plan was intended to control growth and protect the landscape by mandating open space, limiting new construction to specific, predetermined sites, and providing for essential municipal services as the new neighborhoods were rising.

In March 1971, State Senator John Marchi of Staten Island introduced a bill to create the South Richmond Development Corporation, an entity with authority to acquire property through eminent domain and construct new towns for 400,000 new residents. In office since 1956, Senator Marchi was the most respected and powerful Republican in the city. He had defeated Mayor John Lindsay in the Republican primary in June 1969, only to lose in November as Lindsay won reelection on the Liberal and Independent lines. In Albany, he was chairman of the Senate’s powerful City of New York Committee, which controlled all legislation affecting the city. But despite his statewide prominence among Republicans, despite his unquestioned popularity on Staten Island, and despite the backing of Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Mayor Lindsay, Senator Marchi could not force the South Richmond plan through the legislature over the loud objections of Staten Islanders, and in trying, he almost destroyed his career. The surprisingly nasty controversy revealed a fault line in the pattern of big government devising and carrying forward big plans, the planning consensus that had prevailed in New York since the New Deal. On Staten Island, the South Richmond plan fostered a middle class revolt against what they saw as an elitist, liberal program imposed upon them.²

Liberal Planning

Liberal Manhattan Republican John Lindsay was elected mayor in 1965, promising a fresh approach to city government and new solutions to the city’s problems. He actually won on Staten Island with 45.8 percent of the vote (slightly more than his citywide percentage) to Democrat Abraham Beame’s 28.9 percent. William F. Buckley, the Conservative Party candidate, finished especially strong on the island, receiving 25.2 percent of the vote (he received 12.9 percent citywide).³ Buckley never expected to win; indeed, when asked what his first act as mayor would be he quipped, “I’d demand a

² Fred Siegel develops this theme in Revolt Against the Masses: How Liberalism Has Undermined the Middle Class (New York: Encounter Books, 2013), 119: “from the mid ’60s to the mid-’70s, public life was roiled by the intersection of millenarian reveries and apocalyptic fears. The promise of an all-encompassing expertise capable of conquering poverty clashed with the dystopian realities of cities caught in the violent grip of an increasingly feral underclass. The clash kept the country continually off-balance.”
recount.” He had run, he said, not for himself, but “for the set of ideas I represent.” His ideas certainly resonated among voters on Staten Island, and in hindsight a strong showing by a third party conservative was an ominous portent for Lindsay’s liberal agenda there.

Lindsay had a remarkable capacity to attract energetic and committed young people to serve in his administration. He gave them extraordinary responsibilities and consulted with them on a full range of policy issues. An innovative element in the new administration’s agenda was the idea that design and the physical environment could influence social behavior and individual well-being. According to architectural critic Paul Goldberger, Lindsay believed that design “was not an aesthetic frill but a critical element of public policy.” Through better planning and inspired design, the city could be transformed “into a pleasing, even an uplifting, environment.” During his campaign for mayor, Lindsay flew over the city in a helicopter with architect Philip Johnson and landscape architect Robert L. Zion. Ada Louise Huxtable covered the adventure for the Times, and Lindsay told her, “My enthusiasm for the city’s potential far outstrips my depression over smog, decay, absence of greenery and missed opportunities. There is great hope for New York. But it will require bold action, sweeping vision and daring plans. This is the day for long-range planning and the use of experts.” Flying over Staten Island, he remarked that the borough “is being devoured by land grabbers.”

In 1965 several young architects and planners inspired by the prospect of effecting significant changes in the urban environment and looking “for an opportunity to put some of our ideas to work” volunteered for his mayoral campaign. They worked under Donald Elliot, who subsequently became chairman of the City Planning Commission in the new administration. Jonathan Barnett, one of the idealistic young architects, contended that “while many of the City’s problems can not be cured by improvement in urban design, the issues involved are not trivial. Urban design can make

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5 College of Staten Island Oral History Project, Steve Isenberg, New York City Politics, CSI Oral History Collection, Vol. VI (Staten Island: 2005), 32-34.
a substantial difference to the welfare and livelihood of large segments of the population.” Soon after his election Lindsay appointed a task force on urban design headed by William Paley, chairman of CBS. They recommended the creation of an Urban Design Group within the Department of City Planning. The mayor embraced the idea as a way to “bring new stature, coherence and boldness to our city’s urban planning.”

Compared with the administration of his predecessor, Robert Wagner, and his Construction Coordinator Robert Moses, John Lindsay certainly embraced a fresh approach to urban planning. He believed that major urban development projects should be brought before the public “in the early stages, thus supplying the means of communicating between the city and the citizenry. Instead of recriminations after a proposal has been completely planned, authentic consultation between concerned groups is possible so that final development represents as much unanimity as possible.” Lindsay recognized, of course, that “on some occasions interests might be irreconcilable.”

The state, too, was embracing bold new planning initiatives. Governor Nelson Rockefeller had named Edward J. Logue to head the new Urban Development Corporation, and Logue advocated a pro-active program to combat urban sprawl. Logue came to New York from Boston, where he had been the Development Administrator and initiated plans to transform Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market. A 1970 report issued by the U.D.C. and the Office of Planning Coordination asserted, “Clearly we need urban growth policies … that will involve both the public and the private sectors of our economy in an effort to conserve our land and improve the quality of life for all our people.” As part of the solution, they embraced the concept of new communities to provide “a healthy and attractive environment for a broad range of people, rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, black and white,” emphasizing the usual attributes of good schools.

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and safe streets, with “open space and recreation in close proximity to the conveniences of the city.” Good design, progressive design, would further social goals.

Lindsay wanted to foster the livable city, a place planned not to speed traffic along limited access highways but where residents could enjoy a more human-scaled environment. He killed the Lower Manhattan Expressway and supported the designation of the SoHo Historic District, preserving the blocks of distinctive cast iron architecture. His parks commissioner closed Central Park to automobile traffic on Sundays. On Staten Island, he blocked the construction of parkways that would have forever despoiled the Greenbelt, and also acquired Sailor’s Snug Harbor as a cultural preserve. All these initiatives were in sharp contrast to the ends pursued by the previous administration.

At the same time, the Lindsay administration embraced the tenets of big government. While it seemed that the Wagner administration was concerned with completing a plan for its own sake, the Lindsay team wanted to use government to further a bold social agenda, to address racial inequities and poverty and to bring hitherto excluded voices into the process. If the ends were different, so were the means. On one extreme this led to the experiment in local control of the public schools that exacerbated race relations and precipitated the disastrous teachers strike in 1968; at the other, it meant supporting Staten Islanders working to defeat Robert Moses’s parkways and save the Greenbelt.

John Lindsay was proud of the initiatives that came out of his administration – special design districts, incentive zoning, landmark designations – and proud that they attracted attention nationally and internationally. “They are watching with interest our attempts to create objective standards for housing quality and planned unit development,” he wrote, “and our methods of involving communities in the design and planning of all aspects of the city – from housing to highways and from streetlights to new towns in the heart of town.”

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From Urban Renewal to New Towns

The roots of the South Richmond controversy are found in the designation of Annadale-Huguenot, an area in southeast Staten Island fronting Raritan Bay, as an urban renewal area in 1963. At that time it was common for public housing and urban renewal projects to be located in the most distant parts of the city, where land was cheapest and where large tracts could be acquired easily. In the years after 1945 a half dozen housing projects were built across the Rockaways on land formerly covered with summer bungalows. But Annadale-Huguenot and its successor, the South Richmond Plan, had more in common with Battery Park City and Roosevelt Island, or Reston, Virginia, than with a typical urban renewal project. By labeling the proposal urban renewal, however, the city was inevitably inviting criticism from Staten Islanders. Indeed, a 1966 Planning Commission report stated that plans for Annadale-Huguenot had been “frustrated by controversy, fears, misunderstandings and official procrastination.”

Figure 1. Aerial view of the Annadale-Huguenot Urban Renewal Area (Annadale-Huguenot: Planning for a New Residential Community on Staten Island, Raymond and May Associates, 1967).


Actually, the City Planning Department saw the entire southern third of South Richmond, a total area of approximately 15,600 acres, as a great opportunity to apply the latest planning principles on what they considered almost a blank slate. Half of all the vacant land in the city was on Staten Island, and the city itself was the largest landowner there, with 2,200 acres of parkland and 1,700 acres of in rem property (when the court determines title to a property and the rights of any parties interested therein). Most of the in rem land had been acquired during the Depression, following a real estate bubble on the island in the 1920s based on a proposal to build a rail tunnel to Brooklyn. In 1960 only about 32,000 people lived in South Richmond, but five years after the bridge opened the number had already risen to about 52,000. According to the 1969 Plan for New York City, “South Richmond, with expanses of heavily wooded and unspoiled acreage, has the largest amount of vacant land in the City – about 6,500 acres. It is here that new communities for 250,000 to 500,000 people can be developed. …” It was clear that the place would be rapidly developed; the question was how, and by whom.

![Map showing vacant land in the New York metropolitan area in 1969. The largest areas were the Hackensack Meadows in New Jersey and the southern portion of Staten Island. The map also shows](image)

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potential landfill off the southern shore of Staten Island. (Department of City Planning, Plan for New York City, 1969, Volume 6, Staten Island).

In early 1966, in office only a few months, the Lindsay administration issued a moratorium on the sale of city-owned property on Staten Island, a necessary prerequisite to the implementation of any plan. Before a year was out, the City Planning Commission issued Staten Island Development: Policies, Programs and Priorities, a report which summarized the administration’s thinking about the island’s future. It opened with the premise “that Staten Island’s primary function in the next decade or so will be to provide land for new housing with both local and regional recreational and institutional uses. … initial land development efforts should be focused primarily upon improving the quality of residential environment and upon conserving or developing recreational and institutional facilities while the opportunities are still present.” The current pattern of development on Staten Island was unsatisfactory, the report stated, and “unless adequate steps are taken soon, we shall see a repetition here of the same urban sprawl, urban neglect and despoilation of natural features that has characterized much of the new growth in other parts of the region.” The Commission placed blame on both the city and the private sector for Staten Island’s “undesirable growth phenomenon.” They identified first the city’s inability to establish adequate development controls and standards, and second “the failure on the part of private builders to depart from the entrenched, monotonous methods of development and seek higher standards for site planning and construction.”

City Planning recognized that the situation in South Richmond, however, called for “a program above and beyond those tools available to the City at this time,” and specifically recommended “the formation of a South Richmond Development Corporation – a quasi-public land development agency – which would be empowered to set up a revolving fund for the purpose of acquiring selected lands (or purchasing development rights), preparing modern subdivision plans subject to City approval, and re-selling land for private development.” One official commented, “We’ve seen these little houses marching down toward the south shore like locusts. They’re often gimcrack

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20 New York City Planning Commission, Staten Island Development, 1-3.
21 Ibid: 5-6.
built back to back on sterile gridiron street patterns where developers knock down trees, blast rock formations and plow up nature.”

What he described is what the planners in the Lindsay administration sought to prevent. Never before had an official municipal voice endorsed such sentiments.

The report is significant also for the assumptions it embraced regarding what constitutes good planning. They recommended that “wherever feasible, new maps should conform to the modern standards for residential development,” especially the mapping of “curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs to inhibit through traffic….” They also suggested that “the Greenbelt concept should be preserved and expanded …. Green walkways, scenic easements, fenways (publicly-protected streams), and strip parks should branch out from large park areas into the developing residential complexes.” The poor quality of new construction was another point: “One- and two-family houses, often characterized by critics as ‘cracker-box variety’ or ‘ticky-tacky’ housing, became the dominant architectural expression. The grid street system and existing side-yard and rear yard zoning requirements have been marching relentlessly southward and establishing beachheads in scattered spots throughout the Island. The consequences of this type of development are not measured merely in terms of esthetics.” The report then included the oft repeated but yet to be proven assertion that “today’s ‘ticky-tacky’ housing becomes tomorrows slums.” Implicit in their thinking was a faith that the city could be the source of enlightened development, guiding and controlling the quality of housing built by the private sector. The chaos of the free market would be made to yield to the order of enlightened top-down planning. In Urban Design as Public Policy (1974), his triunphalist summary of the Lindsay administration’s planning program, Jonathan Barnett wrote, “Nothing is more dangerous to coherence and planning than the creation of a large number of arbitrarily shaped lots, with ownership divided among thousands of individuals.” And that was precisely the situation they confronted on Staten Island.

The report’s final recommendations expressed the optimistic assumption that better planning would “set a new tone and a new approach to urban and suburban living. Staten Island development presents exciting opportunities for innovative, rather than

23 New York City Planning Commission, Staten Island Development, 5, 10, 26, 42.
24 Barnett, 15.
imitative techniques.” Applying new design principles would also “guard against the
economic or social stratification of the Island. … it offers us the chance to create a
climate to minimize social tensions and to deal intelligently and sensitively with
problems that have proved vexing in other areas of the City.” In language which was
certain to raise a red flag, the authors maintained that “open housing” should have special
relevance on Staten Island, which should become “New York’s frontier of opportunity.”
Staten Islanders understood that to mean the new development was intended for blacks,
and concluded that the Lindsay administration intended to solve New York’s racial
problem by pushing it all on them.26

The issue actually was similar to the fight over a proposed public housing project in Forest Hills taking place at the same time. In both cases opponents believed they were
defending a solid middle class community against those perceived as not sharing their
values, a not so veiled reference to race, and outsiders, liberal Manhattanites who would
compromise their hard-earned way of life.27 And the fact that it was the city government,
the Lindsay administration in particular, which was foisting the plan on Staten Island
only fueled the opposition. While Lindsay was dedicated to the politics of inclusion,
repeatedly reaching out to the black and Puerto Rican communities, he simultaneously
alienated the white working-class voters in the outer boroughs. Opposition to liberal
planning in such cases as South Richmond and Forest Hills generated a political
backlash, evident most clearly in the coalition which elected Ed Koch in 1977.28

Quite apart from the utopian visions for South Richmond, there were genuine, and
unique, planning issues there. First, the real estate boom of the 1920s had fostered what
were by the 1960s phantom streets. They were on the map and some even had curbs, but
none of the infrastructure was in place, and only a few hundred homes had gone up. At
the same time, numerous roads and pathways had been created over the years which were
not on any map, and dozens of homes had been built which violated zoning regulations
and the building code. Also, South Richmond lacked sewers, and even the larger new

developments relied on septic systems. In 1967, the city imposed new restrictions on septic systems on Staten Island; builders complained that the too-stringent regulations would make it impossible to build in some areas, which was likely the intent. Finally, the population was going to grow, plan or no plan, and the city would be responsible for schools, libraries, sewers, roads, parks, and all the rest. Above all, the city sought to “move quickly to acquire properties that might otherwise be improperly developed before a comprehensive renewal plan could be completed.”

The Lindsay administration certainly articulated a desire for an alternative pattern of growth. The 1969 master plan, described by Paul Goldberger as “the most radical document the Lindsay administration produced,” decried the “endless rows along the conventional grid streets….This development pattern, if continued, would quickly destroy the natural features of South Richmond.” Ironically, it was the Lindsay administration, increasingly mistrusted by Staten Islanders, especially after the racially charged school strike in the fall of 1968, which had the power to protect the character so many islanders claimed to cherish.

Planned Unit Development

Following through on one of the proposals in the 1966 report Staten Island Development, the Planning Commission amended the zoning resolution the next year to permit what was called planned unit development, or cluster zoning, “to foster more attractive new development on predominantly vacant land.” This innovative suburban form took off as an increasingly popular solution to suburban sprawl in the late 1960s, precisely when the Lindsay administration was looking for ways to improve the quality of new housing. Planned unit development brought together several trends in zoning and planning: a balance between public, private, and common spaces; the preservation of open space; design in accord with the landscape, not imposed arbitrarily imposed upon it; and the relaxing of a rigid application of local zoning requirements, such as mandatory

30 New York City Planning Commission, A Plan for New York City, 1969, 6: Staten Island: 54; Goldberger, 158.
rear and side yards and minimum lot size.\textsuperscript{31} Norman Marcus, counsel to City Planning at the time, recognized also that, at a time of rising crime, this gave residents control over open space in their development.\textsuperscript{32}

According to City Planning Chairman Donald H. Elliott, cluster zoning would “encourage more productive use of open space, the preservation of the best features of the natural environment such as shade trees and fresh-running streams, more varied and better design, increased economies to the builder and prospective homeowner, and greater safety.” By introducing “flexibility” into the process, the Planning Commission hoped to preserve “the Island’s treasured rural and suburban flavor which otherwise might be destroyed in the development which is bound to come.” Furthermore, it offered what they thought a more rational accommodation for the automobile, “separating local and through traffic” while preventing the automobile from dominating “the interior blocks of a residential community.” With the zoning amendment in place, the city offered incentives to builders to apply the tenets of planned unit development.\textsuperscript{33} According to Jonathan Barnett, planned unit development was “as much a street mapping technique as it is a zoning modification,” conceding it was “really a means of getting around zoning restrictions.” With the same overall density, the developer would produce “higher density clusters of housing, leaving significant areas of the tract in their natural state.”\textsuperscript{34} In most suburban places, planned unit developed significantly increased the allowable density; on Staten Island, the effect was density lower than what the 1961 zoning resolution permitted.

Only one prototype was actually built on Staten Island: Village Greens, designed by architect Norman Jaffe. The city anticipated that the completed development would contain about 1,700 homes in a variety of types around loop streets to limit through

\textsuperscript{31} Robert W. Burchell and James W. Hughes, \textit{Planned Unit Development: New Communities American Style} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1972), 1-3, 6, 30, 178; Alexander Garvin, \textit{The American City}, 279-280.


\textsuperscript{34} Barnett, 37-39.
traffic, but only about a third were completed. Just as the planners envisioned, Village Greens featured cul de sacs and clustered housing around a landscaped common, but the overall effect does not live up to its planning heritage. Perhaps the most important reason was that densities were “two and three times the normal practice elsewhere, a reflection of the high density zoning that underlay even the undeveloped areas within city limits.” The houses were jammed together, and most of them had no connection to the private park with its tennis courts and playground. Also, the architecture was cramped and banal, with garage doors the most prominent feature of the facades, and the driveways were placed in such a way as to make it impossible for residents to park in front of their own house or to leave their car in the driveway without blocking the sidewalk. While a lineal descendant of Radburn, the original “Town for the Motor Age,” Village Greens bastardized the key features of its ancestor. The *AIA Guide to New York City* praised the intention but criticized the execution, especially the use of white aluminum siding throughout. The overall result was “very busy visually, thus intensifying the cheek-by-jowl feeling.” Even so, the authors wrote, Village Greens was “far more satisfying than the land-wasting, detached tract housing prevalent on the island.”

Dan Master, the realtor and Conservative Party member who led the charge against the South Richmond plan, was not impressed, however. “This was supposed to be the latest, taking into consideration all the ills of the past,” he said, “and as far as I was concerned it was the worst. … It was something the city more or less favored and gave them a lot of variances.” As much support as the city gave Village Greens, the development spurred few imitators.

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37 Willensky and White, 850.


Enter the Rouse Company

In 1967, a private planning and urban design firm prepared four possible schemes for the Annadale-Huguenot urban renewal site. Not one of them resembled any previous urban renewal project, for they took as their mandate an “obligation to build a better residential community.” The plans for the 1,080 acre site ranged from 2,840 units with an estimated population of 11,400 to 10,850 units housing 35,200 people, the maximum
allowed under current zoning. Each option emphasized single family homes; only the highest density option placed a majority of the units in apartment buildings. Their scheme introduced a new element — construction around a new lagoon on landfill extending into Raritan Bay. The street layout would conform to the topography and route through traffic away from residential blocks, and most existing homes would be preserved, despite their sometimes irrational siting. The resemblance to Reston in the renderings was not a coincidence, for the Planning Commission had specifically singled out that place, then under construction, as a model.

These plans were intended only as the basis of discussion, but many of the ideas were incorporated into the Housing and Development Administration’s final plan for Annadale-Huguenot. The first objective was “to assemble public and privately-owned vacant parcels which are the result of old, premature subdivisions — laid out in an obsolete gridiron pattern — in order to develop a new street system and community structure.” They hoped to “preserve and utilize … the natural features of the area” and assure that development would “make the most efficient and economic use of municipal expenditures required to provide necessary supporting facilities.” Of course, the proposal also referenced blight, “substandard and unsanitary structures” and the “physical deterioration of numerous summer cottages.”

Determining that conditions on Staten Island required the application of more powerful planning tools than available then, the Planning Commission recommended “an entirely new vehicle for development… one that can act in behalf of the City and in the public interest and, at the same time, not be encumbered by the restraints—economic, administrative and legal—that have handcuffed the City in the past.” This would emerge as the South Richmond Development Corporation, an entity created specifically to acquire “land for subdivision, re-mapping and re-sale to private developers.”


43 New York City Planning Commission, Staten Island Development, 41.
Figure 5. Proposal for Annadale-Huguenot Urban Renewal Area showing apartment towers on landfill (Annadale-Huguenot: Planning for a New Residential Community on Staten Island, Raymond and May Associates, 1967).

Figure 6. Rendering of proposed development in the Annadale-Huguenot Urban Renewal Area, 1967 (Archives and Special Collections, College of Staten Island).
The Rouse Company was the ideal developer for what the Lindsay team envisioned. Rouse, of course, had built dozens of shopping malls across the country, including the Staten Island Mall, and later became synonymous with the festival marketplace, exemplified by Boston’s Faneuil Hall, Baltimore’s Inner Harbor, and New York’s South Street Seaport.44 A Rouse subsidiary, The American City Corporation, had recently begun constructing Columbia, Maryland, a new town of 14,000 acres located between Baltimore and Washington. Columbia was “designed to eliminate uncontrolled sprawl and the inconveniences of the current sub-division design.” Construction began in 1967, and by 2000 Columbia had grown into a city of 88,370 residents. The most innovative features of this new town were the acreage devoted to open space, the variety of housing types, and the clustering of residential units in separate villages, each housing between 10,000 and 20,000 residents.45

Like Lindsay and Rockefeller, James Rouse embraced the tenets of liberal planning – noble intentions, social engineering, state sponsorship, and grand scale – both as a sound business decision and because he shared their confidence and optimism. He rejected the typical, wasteful pattern of suburbanization, where, “relentlessly, the bits and pieces of a city are splattered across the landscape. By this irrational process, non-communities are born – formless places without order, beauty, or reason; with no visible respect for people or the land.”46 Personally and politically conservative, Rouse disapproved of social spending and was wary of federal government interference in the housing industry. He nonetheless sought partnerships with local government, always, however, insisting upon private sector leadership and control over finances and design.47 As if to confirm Rouse’s point, the Johnson administration had launched a program to build new towns on surplus federal land at the same time Columbia was under construction, and it failed completely.48 At Columbia, Rouse incorporated all the widely accepted tenets of urban and suburban planning, even embracing a measure of social

44 See Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, America’s Salesman of the Businessman’s Utopia (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2004). Bloom makes no mention of South Richmond.
46 Garvin, The American City, 252.
47 Bloom, xiv-xvii.
engineering by consciously promoting racial integration.\textsuperscript{49} The conservative real estate developer built a new town appealing to liberal sensibilities.

At a conference on “The Metropolitan Future” held at the University of California in 1963, Rouse delivered an address he titled “It Can Happen Here.” Building on the assumption that better planning and the application of higher social values was not only possible but the only rational course of action, Rouse asserted the true purpose of community was “to provide an environment and an opportunity to develop better people. The most successful community would be that which contributed the most by its physical form, its institutions, and its operations to the growth of people.” The solutions, he believed, awaited only “plans and proposals big enough to solve our problems. People are drawn by logic and reason and by a deep yearning for order, beauty, and a good life to the plans that deal with real problems and offer real solutions. They will rise to the big and dramatically good plans—they will yawn at the timid, the cautious, the unconvincing.” Nowhere would this be more true than on Staten Island, where the alternative would be “years of fragmented planning and development decisions without any discernible mechanism for effectively guiding private development toward a specific set of goals.”\textsuperscript{50}

The City first contracted with the Rouse Company “to conduct a comprehensive study of the economics of a large-scale development [that] will provide a basis for planning future development.”\textsuperscript{51} The result was indeed a big plan for Staten Island, but the local response fell far short of Rouse’s noble expectations. The company’s 142-page report claimed, “South Richmond’s greatest potential is the opportunity it affords the city to create an environment that is the best that is possible. It can also be a place to test new ideas and try innovations which may be applicable to, and usable by, the rest of the city and the nation.” The American City Corporation envisioned a new city for about 450,000 residents in South Richmond, featuring a range of housing types and environmentally sensitive siting. The chief recommendation was the creation of a new public corporation which “would serve as the administrator of a ‘land bank’ made up of City, State and private land acquired through purchase, condemnation or transfer. It would also serve as


\textsuperscript{50} The Rouse Company, \textit{An Analysis of Development Trends and Projections and Recommendations for a New City in South Richmond} (May 1970), v, 3-13.

the agency for land development, planning, administration, promotion and related functions and would obtain long-term capital funds for those facilities that would be leased or sold to appropriate public or private bodies.” This included the construction of new schools to be leased to the Board of Education and new parks to be turned over to the Parks Department.52

Their new city would rise according to a formula allocating 50% of the land for housing and 20% dedicated to open space, the remainder reserved for commercial and institutional uses. What made the project especially attractive for Rouse was the prospect of selling thousands of dwelling units to be built on 3,300 acres of landfill. The company’s 1970 report was explicit: “the largest single contiguous parcel in the project area … it would be free of many of the legal-political factors … [and] could provide early and clear evidence of the commitment to build a new City….” Without revenues from construction on this made land “the economies to be achieved in large-scale development would be materially reduced, and this, in turn, would significantly reduce the net return anticipated in the New City land development process.”53 Of course, this piece of the plan also attracted significant criticism. But the idea of building housing on landfill originated with the city, not Rouse. The 1969 Plan for New York City noted the possibility of creating “additional vacant land by filling in the shallow waters off the shore. A shelf extends a considerable distance off shore; the cost of creating land on it compares favorably with land values within the district.”54

The Legislation

Buoyed by the Rouse report, the Lindsay administration crafted legislation to create a public benefit corporation possessing condemnation powers, which would then transfer the property to the Rouse Company. In his capacity as chairman of the state senate’s City of New York Committee, John Marchi introduced the first South Richmond

bill in the legislature for the Lindsay administration in 1971. He believed the mayor was entitled to have his measures introduced into the legislature, even a mayor who had been a political opponent only two years before. “I’d introduce a bill calling for the abolition of the Ten Commandments if I were asked,” he once said, “although I wouldn’t personally support it.” While he introduced the bill for Lindsay, Marchi quickly made the issue his own. According to Jack Haggerty, counsel to Senate Majority Leader Warren Anderson, Marchi was, “the most zealous champion of a bill I’ve ever seen.” Yet, Haggerty had a bad feeling about the bill, and thought that the development corporation “was one of these vehicles that get people in trouble.” But Marchi sincerely believed that this plan was best hope for Staten Island’s future. “I think we’re offered the opportunity to do better, to create better, to shape the change that has to come,” he said. “We should embrace the chance to plan a community where the amenities would be in before homes are built. We have had the reverse for too long.”

The public hearings on Staten Island in the fall of 1971 did not go well for the administration. Opponents packed each venue and loudly and not always politely expressed their objections. “I wanted them to tell me in the hearings what they wanted,” lamented Marchi afterwards, “not what they didn’t want. I didn’t get very much of that.” For his advocacy of the plan, Marchi was called “a liberal,” and one critic thought he was “behaving like an off-islander,” perhaps the most cutting insult that could be tossed at a Staten Islander. At the end of February 1972, five months after the contentious public meetings, Marchi announced he was introducing a revised version of the legislation to create the South Richmond Development Corporation and, as he put it, to save 10,000-acres on the island “from the ravages which now confront it.” He tried to convey a sense of urgency. “We can’t delay,” he said. “Every day trees are being cut down, gridiron streets laid out, foundations being dug. When the land is ravaged and concrete poured over everything, it will be too late.” The legislation called for a corporation with a nine-
member board appointed by governor and mayor, and a majority would be Staten Islanders, subject to approval of state senate. Within twenty years the Rouse Company was to build twelve new towns; the price tag was $6.5 billion in public and private funds, including the city’s commitment to expend $530 million for infrastructure.\textsuperscript{58}

This ambitious plan had the full support of the Mayor and the most powerful politician on Staten Island. It had the support of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce and the New York State Council of Churches, and was backed by WCBS Radio, the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{Daily News}. It was to be implemented by a respected and sophisticated private company, and by the time the South Richmond Plan was announced to the residents it was so far advanced that it seemed to be a done deal. Why, then, did it fail?

Private Property Rights, the Conservative Party, and Political Realities

The single most crucial factor in the defeat of South Richmond was the Conservative Party. Founded in 1962 to counter Nelson Rockefeller’s dominance over the state’s Republican Party, the Conservatives soon achieved extraordinary influence among both Republicans and Democrats on the Island. As the South Richmond controversy heated up the Conservatives threatened to deny their endorsement to any incumbent favoring the plan. A \textit{Times} editorial acidly commented, “Right-wing dogmatists feeding on groundless fears, the Conservatives have obviously learned nothing from the development disaster all around them.”\textsuperscript{59} Senator Marchi’s counsel at the time, Robert Straniere (later an Assemblyman), thought that from a conservative philosophical point of view, “what they saw was government regulation and government taking of private property that was plain not acceptable to them. They preferred local zoning, even though the zoning resolution was destroying Staten Island.”\textsuperscript{60} Dan Master repeatedly hammered the idea that the city was going to take the homes of Staten


Islanders and hand their property over to the Rouse Company. Though the legislation clearly stated that no homes would be taken, “private property rights” quickly became the rallying cry of opponents. A second reason, as Senator Marchi later declared flatly, was that opponents “played the racial card down there.”

Planning, Harvey M. Jacobs and Kurt Paulsen have written, “is fundamentally about the allocation, distribution, and alteration of property rights.” In the history of planning, “the question has not been whether private property or government intervention will prevail, but rather whose property rights and interests are to be given more protection.” In recent decades, public planning has become increasingly vulnerable to attacks from property rights advocates who express their opposition in nearly populist terms, contending that efforts to impose “elite values on all groups … is out of step with core American values.” Staten Islanders made similar arguments against the South Richmond proposal. The city was using its power to transfer property from one owner to another based on the liberal values of the Lindsay administration. By what right, they demanded. Lost in the debate was the ideal of planning itself, that the goal was to represent “the interests of the community at large, the regional environment, and future generations… as well as the interests of those traditionally excluded from decision-making.” Individual property owners rarely do so, but planners must.

What happened on Staten Island presaged the controversial decision in Kelo v. City of New London in 2005. Again, conservative voices opposed the use of eminent domain to take property from one individual and its transfer to another for what the state deemed a higher public purpose. Such state action was sanctioned by the United States Supreme Court in Berman v. Parker (1954), when Justice William O. Douglas first expanded the concept of “public use” to encompass “public purpose.” Eminent domain is “merely the means to the end,” he wrote, even if the means is private enterprise. “We cannot say that public ownership is the sole method of promoting the public purposes of

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community development projects.” Writing for the 5-4 majority in Kelo, Justice John Paul Stevens determined that even if the area was not blighted, a determination by City of New London “that the area was sufficiently distressed to justify a program of economic rejuvenation is entitled to our deference.” In her indignant dissent, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor countered, “Under the banner of economic development, all private property is now vulnerable to being taken and transferred to another private owner, so long as it might be upgraded. … As for the victims, the government now has license to transfer property from those with fewer resources to those with more.” In general, proponents of big government praised Kelo, for without it state and local governments would be prevented from advancing their land use agendas.

With their South Richmond proposal, the Lindsay administration was bolstered by both legal precedent and a legacy in New York of large-scale housing plans that employed eminent domain, such as Stuyvesant Town and Washington Square Village. In that sense, there was nothing new about the South Richmond plan. What was new was the groundswell of grassroots opposition and its unexpected resonance among Staten Islanders.

The contest came down to a public relations battle, the opponents hammering the mantra of “private property rights” and proponents presenting the benefits of thoughtful design, environmental sensitivity, and comprehensive planning. Kate Rooney, a member of Senator Marchi’s staff, described the plans as “a slick Manhattan PR kind of thing.” At the ferry terminal the Rouse people displayed renderings of “what they said it would look like down there, with these nice townhouses… and they had a picture of … a vacant field there that was like a lot of rubbish, and they said, do you want this or this, and it was very insulting…” She thought “it just wasn’t done properly, either from the city’s viewpoint or from Marchi’s viewpoint, PR-wise, because what you did have on Staten Island was all this vacant land. Now the way it was presented was as Big Brother taking over and we’re going to have massive housing and we’re going to have nothing to say about it. … But really what we were saying is we have all this land and this opportunity and let’s make

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sure it’s done right, and by right he meant infrastructure there to support it, and also so you don’t have 40 x 100 cookie cutter [homes].” Still, the plan had features which were completely alien to Staten Island, including the oversized apartment towers on landfill in Raritan Bay. For many Islanders, said Rooney, it was, “‘What are you talking about, this is little old bucolic Staten Island.’ But Marchi was able to have the vision to say, it’s not going to be vacant for very much longer, let’s look ahead twenty years, and what do you want.”

Many residents opposed the plan because they believed it would destroy the Staten Island they loved, but its defeat ironically opened the door to free market development which all but swallowed up the old communities.

Marchi had no trouble getting the measure through the Senate. He recalled that some of his colleagues “were aware there were problems, but I said, ‘Look, I want it, and that’s it.’” In the Assembly it was a different matter altogether. The bill never came to the floor, as Staten Island Republicans Edward Amann and Lucio Russo broke with their long-time colleague and bowed to the wishes of the Conservative Party. As Conservative Party leader Dan Master put it, “if you go for this thing we’re not going to support you anymore. … we’re against something on a very, very principled way that we feel is un-American…, that they’re denying people their private property rights… we’re supposed to tell them, hey, go ahead, vote for it, we’ll still back you. No, that’s not the way politics works.” According to Amann, “They were small in numbers, but if they put up a candidate they could draw off a lot of votes. And for a person such as me who was running in a Democratic district, I didn’t need a couple of thousand people wandering off the Republican line.” He added that while “they don’t threaten you, it’s implied you’ll never get their endorsement again, and you can do what you want to do.”

Robert Straniere stated flatly, “It didn’t happen because of the power of the Conservative Party,” and Amann and Russo were “absolutely convinced they couldn’t get re-elected if they didn’t have the support of the Conservative Party.” They were not, he suggested,

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69 CSI Oral History Project, Edward Amann, *Staten Island Politics*, 12-16.
71 CSI Oral History Project, Edward Amann, *Staten Island Politics*, 12-16.
“profiles in courage.” Marchi was less concerned with the possibility of electoral defeat, particularly when it came to matters of principle, and Marchi was pushing South Richmond as a matter of principle. He believed Amann and Russo opposed the plan “because a lot of people were screaming about it, which never shook me up.” Additional opposition came from a group of men calling themselves the Waterfront Watch, members of local yacht clubs who were alarmed at the prospect of landfill ruining Raritan Bay. They took their cause to Albany and presented legislators with booklets showing how the bay was then enjoyed and the landfill that was proposed. New to the political process, they proved surprisingly effective in challenging the bill and embarrassing Marchi. Their lobbying was especially timely because the federal government had recently proposed the creation of the Gateway National Recreation Area, encompassing part of Jamaica Bay, Breezy Point and Fort Tilden, Great Kills Park, and Sandy Hook in New Jersey. Congressman John Murphy of Staten Island brought together 15 of the 18 House members from New York City to urge Assembly Speaker Perry Duryea to defeat Marchi’s bill because they wanted Great Kills, the location of the proposed landfill, to be part of Gateway. Finally, the city council voted to transfer Great Kills and Miller Field to the state on the condition that it would then be turned over to the federal government. “Once that happened,” said a member of the Waterfront Watch, “Senator Marchi was finished, because this was the Achilles heel of the whole thing.” Without Great Kills Park, there could be no landfill, and no apartment towers.

The South Richmond plan passed in the Senate in two consecutive sessions, 1972 and 1973, only to fail in the Assembly. Assembly Speaker Perry Duryea viewed the legislation as a local issue; he deferred to his two Staten Island members and would not overrule them. After the second defeat in the Spring of 1973, Marchi announced he would not introduce it again.

72 CSI Oral History Project, Robert Straniere, 9-10.
The political fallout for Senator Marchi nearly ended his career. Throughout the 1960s he easily won reelection; in 1970, a year after his mayoral campaign and the last contest before the South Richmond controversy, he garnered 73.4% of the vote, with a third of his total coming on the Conservative party line, enough to defeat his Democratic opponent without a single Republican vote. In 1972, however, the county’s Conservatives shunned Marchi and nominated party vice-chairman Dan Master. Party chairman Henry S. Jorin explained, “There was no bitterness or animosity. It’s a matter of principle.” In a bruising campaign, Master received about 18% of the vote and actually bested Marchi in every district in South Richmond.76

Marchi’s passionate championing of the plan also had citywide ramifications. In his second run for mayor in 1973, Marchi secured only the Republican nod. At Master’s urging the Conservatives denied Marchi their line, choosing instead Bronx Congressman Mario Biaggi. At the same time, the Republicans—over Marchi’s objections—attempted to deny their line to any candidate who accepted the Conservative Party endorsement, an unpleasant prospect for any politician facing a tight race on Staten Island.77 In the mayoral race, Marchi’s showing fell far below his 1969 total; remarkably, he failed even to carry his home borough, capturing less than half of his total of four years earlier; in 1969 Marchi won 62 percent of the vote on Staten Island; in 1973 he received only 28 percent.78

For his ’74 reelection campaign, Marchi returned to the Conservative fold, though he received the endorsement only over the objections of many in the party’s rank and file, Dan Master in particular. Marchi was reelected with 56.6% of the vote, but without the 11,000 votes he received on the Conservative line he likely would have lost.79 This proved fortunate for the city, as Marchi was elevated to chairman of the Finance

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Committee in the Republican-controlled Senate and was a crucial player in putting together the rescue package for the city during the fiscal crisis in 1975.

South Richmond without the Plan

In June 1973, the problem was turned over to a special South Richmond Task Force under Planning Commission Chairman John Zuccotti. The result was another report, *Towns in South Richmond*, issued in 1975. The constraints placed upon the task force show how completely the opponents had triumphed. There would be no condemnation of existing structures, no development in Raritan Bay beyond the existing shoreline, no reduction in existing parks, an upper limit on population based on the existing zoning envelope (up to 300,000), and finally, the utilization of “existing planning tools” only.\(^8\) The final report was just so much paper, a set of recommendations and suggestions with no legal teeth. It merely stated what the planners preferred, and the Special Purpose District established there provided scant protection from banal construction. Dan Master and the Conservative Party opposed even those watered down final zoning proposals.\(^8\)

What was the final outcome, that is, what was built in South Richmond in the succeeding decades? First, there has been no landfill, and no apartment towers were constructed. Second, the guidelines proposed in 1975 were almost completely brushed aside, and today there is no difference between what was built in South Richmond and the rest of Staten Island. It is the very model of free market development. For this the city must accept much of the blame, for after the defeat of South Richmond the sale of public lands resumed, and indeed accelerated during the fiscal crisis, without the installation of sewers or the construction of schools. As Dan Master, who was in fact a sharp realtor, saw it, “there was helter-skelter selling the city properties off, parcels here, parcels there. They wanted the money, and they didn’t care whether it was good planning or not, because good planning would have said, look, we’re selling this stuff in the middle of the

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woods, we’re going to get peanuts for it, why don’t we put sewers in and get the schools
built, and then … we’ll put it up and we’ll get ten times as much for it.”82 But the city
was close to bankruptcy, and virtually all municipal construction projects came to a dead
stop. There was no possibility, in other words, for the city to implement even the most
elemental features of the plan. “Shame on New York City,” is the verdict of Marchi’s
counsel, Kate Rooney, “that didn’t do just voluntary local planning out there to make sure
it didn’t turn out the way it has.”83

Figure 7. Homes in South Richmond, 2001 (author’s photograph).

82 CSI Oral History Project, Dan Master, Staten Islanders: 92.
83 CSI Oral History Project, Kate Rooney, The Staff of Senator John J. Marchi, 143-146.
The small historic communities of Tottenville, Annadale, Prince’s Bay, and Great Kills have seen much new construction, and today the older homes which were to have been protected under the Rouse plan are being torn down to make way for multi-family houses or oversized mansions. Even the landmarked home of Frederick Law Olmsted in Annadale is completely surrounded by new construction. But the quality of the architecture is not distinguished, and coordinated planning nonexistent. As one besieged homeowner put it, “Cute little cottages are giving way to ugly monstrosities, and I get vertigo just looking at them.” In many new developments, driveways are too short to accommodate cars; sidewalks are narrow or missing entirely; buildings rise adjacent to tiny rear yards; and private streets do not conform to city codes, resulting in streets and cul-de-sacs too narrow to allow garbage pickup or service vehicles. “If I had known there was no garbage pickup, mail delivery or sidewalks, I would have stayed in Brooklyn,” said one clearly frustrated new resident.\footnote{Douglas Feiden, “Disturbing Developments: S.I. dream homes a housing nightmare,” \textit{New York Daily News}, September 21, 2003.}

Unbridled development also intensified stresses on the environment. With wetlands filled in or surrounded by homes, surface streams confined or covered over, and more of the landscape paved over, water run-off emerged as an endemic problem. Many homes in the new subdivisions suffered from persistent flooding. Belatedly, the city moved to preserve woodlands and wetlands, but it is hardly in the spirit of the original South Richmond plan. One impressive and successful innovation has been the creation of
the Bluebelt to protect the streams and control flooding by connecting “the natural drainage corridors with conventional storm sewers for an integrated stormwater management system.” But that mitigation program began only after decades of construction and much of the damage was done.

Conclusion

Frank Popper has suggested that “there has never been a time when it was as good to be an American city planner or land use lawyer as the late 1960s and early 1970s.” Planners were confronting the environmental issues related to the rapid development of the post-war years, politicians and government officials were receptive and encouraging, and the public was engaged in these issues to an unprecedented extent. Those were also the years when the urban crisis was the nation’s most pressing issue; poverty, race relations, education inequities, and housing reform comingled in a liberal social agenda that enjoyed support among business leaders and the public no less than politicians. Under Mayor John Lindsay, New York City aggressively tackled these issues, and planners proposed bold initiatives to address endemic problems and design a more livable city. Staten Island offered the most promising field for enlightened suburban planning, and from the Lindsay administration’s perspective there was no reason why the South Richmond plan should not succeed. A rational approach to building the city of the future, it applied widely accepted planning principles to a location badly in need of guided development, while providing the added benefit of ameliorating deep-rooted urban ills, particularly substandard housing in slums and racial inequities. Unlike the proposals for Battery Park City or Roosevelt Island or the use of the landmarks law to protect historic neighborhoods, on Staten Island the liberal agenda faced a conservative electorate. The bold ideas of the young and confident planners and architects in the Lindsay administration floundered on the shoals of political realities. The Rouse Company, too,

accustomed to encouragement and cooperation from local government, found itself in the unfamiliar realm of rejection.

The Lindsay administration worked with great sincerity to bring hitherto unheard voices into the planning process, usually to remedy endemic ills in minority neighborhoods. But on Staten Island, they faced residents, a great many of them property owners, who saw only inequity and injustice in a plan that would take their property to benefit another private business. The political controversy was brief, and the episode faded away almost entirely. But the total defeat of the enlightened planners precluded any further effort to craft a master plan for the island. The failure of the environmentally sensitive South Richmond plan doomed Staten Island to be “devoured by the land grabbers,” as John Lindsay said at the start of his mayoralty, and dominated by the same banal architecture and destructive land use patterns that so offended the liberal planners.