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The Main Street **WIRE**TM

Roosevelt Island's Community Newspaper

News updates on **Website NYC10044** www.nyc10044.com



Memorial Blossoms A flowering cherry tree surrounded by flowers and a single bench, with a plaque to be unveiled Sunday at 2:00 p.m., are the elements of a Residents Association memorial to Islanders lost on September 11. A roster of dignitaries, religious leaders, and performers will highlight the event, arranged by Vicki Feinmel, a RIRA delegate from Island House.

RIOC Board Now Agrees on a Park at Southpoint, Says Labate

In a dialogue with Southpoint Park advocate Shirley Margolin at Thursday night's RIOC Board meeting, Board Chair Marybeth Labate said that the current RIOC Board is in general agreement that Southpoint should be reserved as a park.

Labate said, "I don't think I could have said two years ago that there was unanimous support on the Board that there should be a park there, and a big chunk of that land be devoted to a park. I can say that now, very comfortably and confidently. But the big sticking point as it is with every difficult issue is, as Rob [Ryan, RIOC President] said, this is a

See **Park**, page 10

First Southtown Building Rising at Rate of About Two Stories a Week

by Robert Laux-Bachand

Thirty trucks a day are delivering concrete, and every workday a crew of about 80 is taking this raw material and giving final shape to Roosevelt Island's other half, Southtown.

Building No. 1 of Southtown, 215 apartments that will house Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center employees and their families, is rapidly rising at the south end of Main Street. By August 1, the structure should be topped out at 16 stories, according to Scott Weiss, project manager for AMEC, which is overseeing the work for the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation.

Construction of Building No. 2, 180 units for Cornell Weill Medical College, is being staged at about three weeks behind the first building. Brickwork and window installation will start in the summer even as both superstructures are going up, Weiss said. The projected date for completion of the buildings, he said, is "right on the cusp of summer to fall of 2003."

The general contractor, Monadnock Construction, Inc., of Brooklyn, is a partner of The Hudson Companies, which is developing the nine-building, 2,000-unit project along with The Related Companies.

Monadnock and its project manager, Greg Bauso, have so far avoided any major disruptions of Island activities. A huge crane that lifts buckets of concrete was delivered about two weeks ago on a barge from New Jersey, via the east channel of the East River. "It was docked out at the oil dock across

See **Southtown**, page 8



As seen from inside the Southtown site this week, Building #1 has risen five stories-plus. More photos on page 8, and in color on **Website NYC10044** at www.nyc10044.com.

RIOC Board

Conflict Over Blackwell Minischool Space Gets Hot-Potato Treatment

by Dick Lutz

A rift between the Lilies Christian School and the Roosevelt Island Youth Program over the future of the Blackwell minischool broke into the open Thursday night at the meeting of the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation (RIOC) Board of Directors.

Both entities want the space.

The Youth Program claims it by virtue of a promise made years ago by RIOC, reinforced by periodic assurances over the years. Its director, Charles De Fino, says it has taken nearly ten years to raise the funds necessary for the expansion, but that he now has commitments in place – at least for the present – for the necessary funds. There is a concern, however, that a major part of a \$750,000 commitment could be lost if

See **Minischool**, page 8

Garden Club Keeps Faith With Community Gardens Movement

by Robert Laux-Bachand

A plot of land you can call your own in the middle of the city: that is the allure of the Roosevelt Island Garden Club. Its garden in Octagon Park is a patchwork of 139 individual pieces but, with a little effort, it can be decoded as a quilt-map of the community.

The garden is deceptive. Occupying less than two acres, it seems bigger because of a trick of perspective – the jumble of miniature landscapes framed in the distance by the towers of the East Side.

Age is a greater illusion. The garden is barely ten years old, but parts of it, grown into jungle and chattering with birds, would have appealed to the wilder instincts of Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central and Prospect Parks, who had little use for flower beds.

Other plots may owe their inspiration to "Crockett's Victory Garden," or to the traditions of the Pacific Rim, formal European estates, or the Mediterranean – or to the hardware aisles of the Home Depot on Northern Boulevard. The Stars and Stripes flutter here, as do the colors of Australia and Puerto Rico. Flowers, especially roses, provide an element of unity. Climbing, bedding, and shrub roses are in bloom throughout most of the growing season, and the rose garden managed by Marjorie Marcallino is one of the garden's focal points. Daffodils, irises, lilies, zinnias, marigolds, and mums exert succeeding claims to dominance.

Several of the club's leaders were among the first residents of Roosevelt Island. They arrived at a time when the community garden movement was sprouting in New York City (the Green Guerrillas take credit for the first garden, at Bowery and Houston, in 1974). This movement – postwar, post-Whole Earth – acquired an ambitious agenda that in-

cluded reclaiming abandoned lots, stabilizing neighborhoods, and improving air quality and biodiversity.

The club here maintains connections to Green Guerrillas and other gardening groups, and to the Roosevelt Island Tree Board. But what was once a movement has become a program, and a network of hundreds of community gardens, supported by federal grants, has been sponsored since 1995 by GreenThumb, part of the City Parks Department.

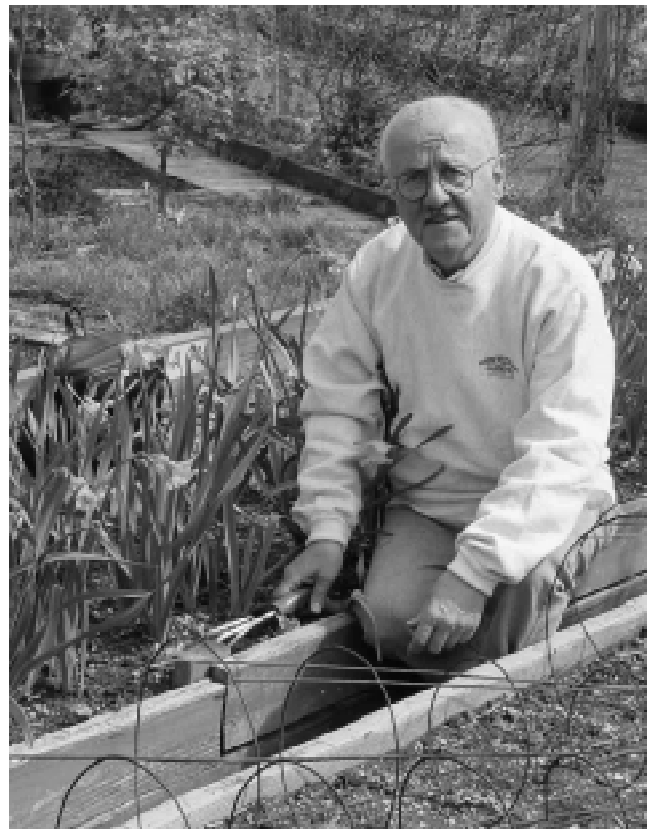
In the early days, though, Roosevelt Island offered something even better: benign neglect. Consider one of the early efforts here, Schwayri Park.

Basically, it was a slab of concrete with a flagpole. In 1984, that was all that remained of the New York Fire Department's garage-like Bureau of Training administrative building. Scattered across this slab, dirt was exposed in various geometric shapes where stairwells, for example, may have been located.

This was enough to ignite the visionary spirit of Dr. Ali Schwayri, a medical doctor who moved here in 1977 and is now the president of the Garden Club. He is also a sharp-eyed scavenger, and the City's water-tunnel construction project provided plenty of cast-off timbers and other materials.

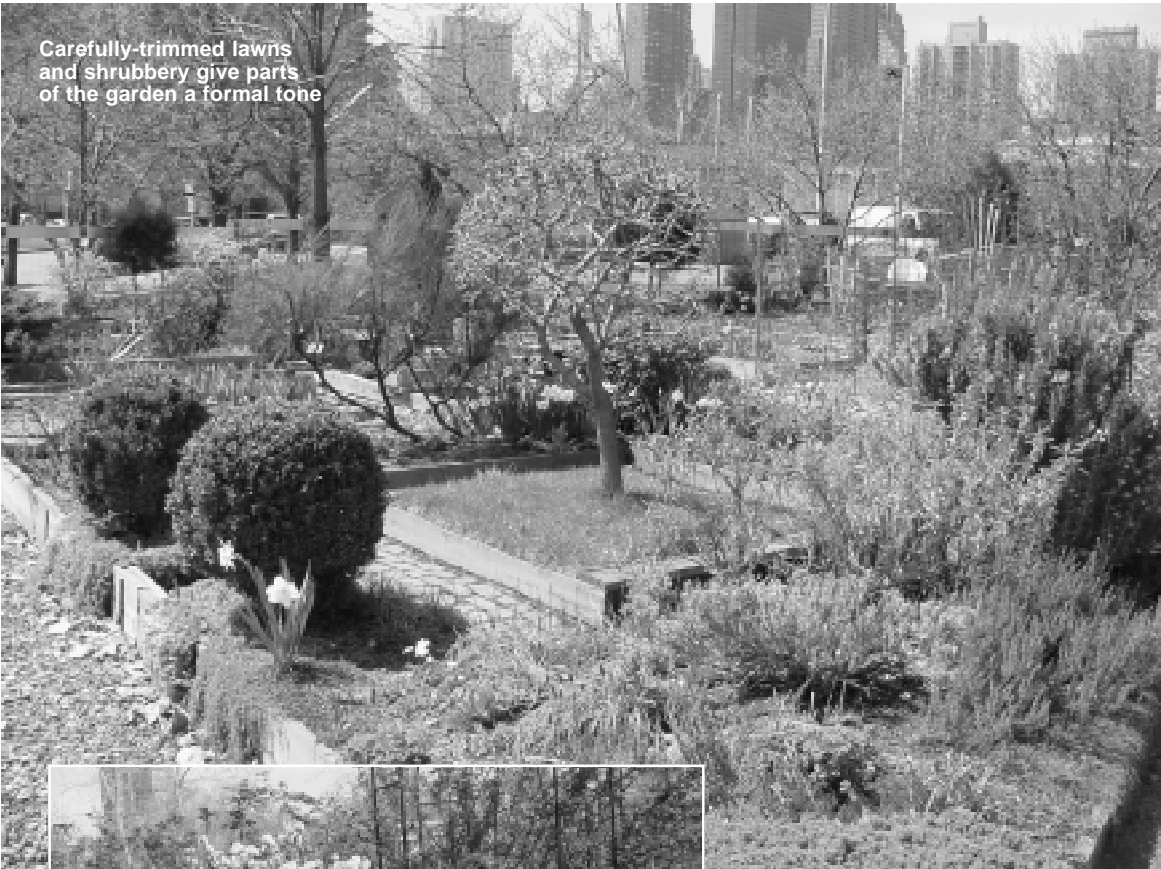
Schwayri and some of his friends hauled timber to the slab and constructed raised flower beds over the exposed soil. They cleaned up the site, built benches out of railroad ties, and in no time, it seemed, the Island had a colorful oasis overlooking the East River, due west of the post office. Schwayri, who has a photo album devoted to this project and labeled *My First Garden – 1984*, called it Metamorphosis Park. But in 1985 his friends put up a plaque that

See **Garden Club**, page 6



Dr. Ali Schwayri was at work in his plot last weekend. He has served a total of seven years as president of the Garden Club.

The Island’s Garden Club Has an Active Present and...



Susan Garone, left, works her plot. Summer-like weather has hastened the growing season this year.



Club President Schwayri calls Vaughn Englesley, above, the “Robert Moses of the Garden Club. One of his creations is a solar-powered fountain.

Garden Club from page 1

gave this short-lived space its proper due: “Schwayri Park.”

Nancy Cruickshank, the club’s secretary, was another of those who literally hit the ground digging when she came here in 1976. She recalls her first plot as being on a “ground-up roadbed” in a community garden that was laid out on a field of rubble north of Westview. “We were like squatters,” she said. There were about 70 to 80 gardeners in those days, and Cruickshank, who went on to become one of the club’s first presidents, said that nearly everybody was intent on planting vegetables. She also remembers the devastation she felt as the bulldozers rumbled through and leveled the remnants of the original community garden to prepare for Manhattan Park.

The Central Nurses Residence Site

By that time, in the later ’80s, the club had already relocated to a site that Cruickshank and others remember as “very big and very beautiful.” It was south of the Central Nurses Residence (CNR), a Depression-era structure that was torn down last year to make way for Southtown. Photos and maps in the collection of Island historian Judith Berdy show that the CNR grounds had been elaborately landscaped, with a tennis court, a reflecting pool, and shaded drives. Those features seemed to have been overtaken by nature when the club re-established itself there.

Schwayri, his friend Vincent Russo, the club’s current vice president, and others who did the heavy lifting at this garden still comprise the nucleus of the club. John Dodge, an artist, laid out the wheel-spoke configuration of the plots – a design that was transplanted to Octagon Park. Marcallino created a rose garden. John Richards, a carpenter, helped to execute the design in both gardens. Sammy Rodriguez was a pillar of the work force. Ann Hallowell, the club’s long-time secretary, kept everything organized, and in later years, Peter Jungkunst, as president, is credited with bringing the administration up to date.

At the Nurses Residence site, Schwayri and Russo fashioned artworks that lent whimsical touches to the picnic areas and other open spaces. A painted plywood wind decoration, carved with a hacksaw, was mounted atop a large rotating file tray salvaged from the Nurses Residence. Concrete core samples bordered the plots. The men also built an open-air gazebo frame, in part from pieces of PVC tubing, as a centerpiece of a bird sanctuary.

The Present Site

The club was forced to move again when the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation embarked on its first, unsuccessful effort to develop Southtown. Some of the club’s constructions, including rose arbors, survive as elements of the present garden, which opened in 1992. Unlike the earlier gardens, however, this one was developed in the full glare of governmental regulation. An Island task force worked with a landscape architecture firm, Weintraub & di Domenico, that was chosen by RIOC to design Octagon Park.

The community garden was a key element of the plan from the beginning, as is clear from Berdy’s records. Public access was one of the ground rules; that is why the garden is open to the public for limited hours on weekends during the summer. And eight plots, in four enclosures with raised planters, were built to accommodate gardeners in wheelchairs. But the club’s desire to expand to 200 plots was thwarted because the City, which retained control of the water-tunnel construction site, put in two air shafts instead of one, Berdy said. Plans for a “Hanging Garden” overlook never materialized, nor did a lawn that opened onto the East River, connected by a promenade to the Island’s thoroughfare. Now it’s a Promenade to Nowhere. In the end, only 9 of the 15 acres of Octagon Park were developed.

The most distinctive feature of the garden is an old-fashioned poplar in the middle of the picnic area. “I trimmed that when we moved in there,” said Schwayri, who at 62 is retired from his medical work. “I climbed on a ladder, which

Garden Club Basics

The Roosevelt Island Garden Club is not in the habit of generating publicity, but neither is it a secret garden. Here is the dirt:

Membership: 133. Nearly all of the gardeners are Island residents, and an estimated 35 to 40 percent were members before the club moved to its current location. You can apply for a plot if you are a New York State resident. The lack of a local residency requirement ties in with the club’s wish to be available to the staff at Coler-Goldwater Memorial Hospital.

Dues: \$35 a year, payable April 1. After that date, if you haven’t paid your dues, the club will start looking to replace you.

Signing up: Write to Box 127, Roosevelt Island, 10044. The phone number that was posted on the garden gate is long out of service. A different box number was published in a listing of Island organizations last month. That was wrong, too.

Getting in: The waiting list, which the club describes as “long,” has averaged about 12 to 15 candidates in recent years. About six plots open up each year, and they are given out in order of sign-up. There is an exception: Members who relinquish their plots when they move away are put on the top of the waiting list if they return to the Island.

Tools: The shed south of the garden contains a collection of vicious mattocks that are capable, in the right hands, of pulverizing the toughest clay or turf. These tools may be of limited use in a raised bed, but just about every other digging, cutting or screening instrument is also stocked there and maintained in beautiful condition by Sammy Rodriguez, a long-time gardener. So you don’t have to keep a shovel in your apartment.

Standards: There is no overt prohibition on any plant, although *Cannabis indica* would probably get you into big trouble, and not just with the Garden Club. Trees are problematical and officially banned, although small apricot and fig trees and such coexist happily with smaller plants. But you can’t take a plot and then let it go to weeds, which will spread rapidly and greatly annoy your neighbors. The club tries to keep close tabs on “unworked” plots and will kick you out.

Award Winners: The club honors its best gardeners. Last year, the blue-ribbon winners were Julie Lipp, for landscape garden, and Nicholas Ortiz for vegetable garden.

was foolish of me, about 15 feet up.”

The club has a good deal with RIOC. There is no fee for use of the site, no payment for water. The tradeoff, however, seems to be what the gardeners consider rather indifferent treatment. They were upset last year when RIOC turned off the water in October, earlier than usual. As it turned out, the 2001 growing season never ended, and water could have been continued for at least another month. Monarch butterflies lingered here in November. There were late-arriving honeybees – a rarity in the Northeast because of mite infestations – working the oregano through the first week of December. Rosemary bushes and arugula bloomed in January.

Vandalism and thefts are probably the club members’ greatest worries. Several security measures were discussed at the club’s annual meeting last month, but the club really depends on alert and dedicated patrolling by the Island’s Public Safety Department to protect the garden. The five-foot anodized aluminum fence, a wavy decorative element of Weintraub’s design, is no deterrent.

One longtime member said all of his peaches were stolen last year. Some of the vandalism was obnoxious: Hoses slashed, beds of greens flooded, flowers destroyed.

Little Leaguers have even been a problem. Trees planted along the perimeter of the garden haven’t been able to snag all of their left field homers.

When gardeners get together, there is talk of barbed wire, a photo ID system, higher fencing, and security cameras – measures that have, for one reason or another, seemed to be unfeasible. But most of the gardeners know they occupy this space as a matter of public privilege. Cooler heads prevail, those who realize that many of their Island neighbors are on the other side of the fence, willing to take their chances, and just waiting to get in.

Besides, there’s no place else to go, and no likelihood that the present garden will be able to expand. “This is our permanent site, hopefully,” Schwayri said.

... A Storied History...



Vincent Russo, left, and Dr. Ali Schwayri greeted Rudolph Giuliani at the gardens in 1989, when Giuliani made his first, unsuccessful run for mayor.



Members of the Garden Club built garden art from found objects. Here, stones are mounted on sections of drainpipe in a sculpture called *The Gardener's Family*.

Large areas of the gardens at the Nurses Residence were open spaces set up as picnic areas and a park.



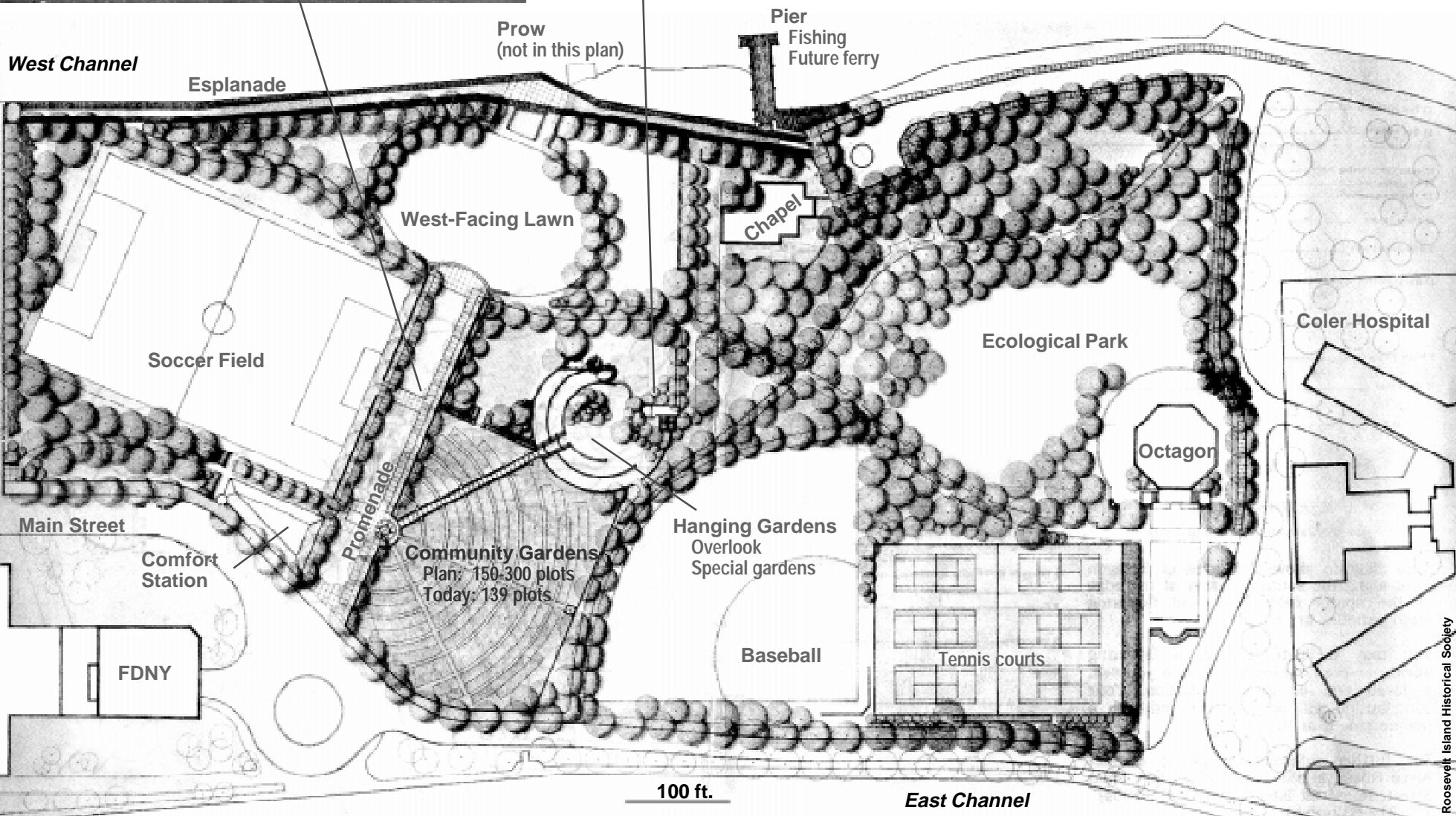
John Dodge's design for the gardens at the Nurses Residence consisted of radiating spokes. This view is from the focal point, looking north toward the Nurses Residence, which was demolished last year to make way for Southtown.



Water Tunnel structures



Older photos from the collection of Dr. Ali Schwayri



Much of a 1990 plan by Weintraub & di Domenico has been realized in the area north of Manhattan Park; much has not. Plans to rehabilitate the Octagon as the centerpiece of an apartment building will reduce the size of the ecological park and make it essentially a courtyard; the Promenade ends at the west edge of the gardens; and two towers associated with Water Tunnel #3 occupy space once envisioned as a hanging garden. In addition, the developers of the Octagon apartments have proposed building a parking structure where the tennis courts are, with courts on its roof.