

Record: 1

Title: UTOPIA, THE BRONX.

Authors: Frazier, Ian

Source: New Yorker. 6/26/2006, Vol. 82 Issue 19, p54-65. 12p. 1 Color Photograph.

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: *COOPERATIVE housing

*DWELLINGS

*APARTMENTS

Geographic Terms: CO-op City (New York, N.Y.)

NEW York (N.Y.)

NEW York (State)

NAICS/Industry Codes: 238390 Other Building Finishing Contractors

236110 Residential building construction

541310 Architectural Services

Abstract: The article presents the historical background for the establishment of Co-op City, a cooperative housing complex in New York City, and its people. Its residential buildings have more than seventy thousand rooms. Co-op City's fifteen thousand three hundred and seventy-two apartments, at full occupancy, house more than sixty thousand people.

Full Text Word Count: 9966

ISSN: 0028792X

Accession Number: 21305156

Database: Academic Search Premier

Section: OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

UTOPIA, THE BRONX

Co-op City and its people

If you take I-95 North through the Bronx heading out of the city, Co-op City will be on your right. Its high-rise apartment buildings stand far enough from one another so that each appears distinct and impressive against the sky. In slow-motion seconds, they pass like the measureless underside of a starship in a science-fiction movie. Drivers who don't live there are soon across the line into Westchester County and thinking of something else. Co-op City is the largest cooperative housing complex in America, possibly in the world. Its residential buildings have more than seventy thousand rooms. No one can say the exact total right offhand. The number of its apartments, however, is as established and immutable as the atomic weight of lead. That number is fifteen thousand three hundred and seventy-two. Co-op City's fifteen thousand three hundred and seventy-two apartments, at full occupancy, house more than sixty thousand people. If Co-op City weren't part of New York City, it would be the tenth-largest municipality in the state.

Co-op City sits mostly on marshland that was filled in--not very successfully, as it turned out--in 1966. Some of its acreage remains tidal flat along the Hutchinson River. At one time, this land and much of the eastern shore of the Bronx was inhabited by the Siwanoy tribe of Indians. Al Shapiro, a retired facilities engineer for the Post Office, who has lived in Co-op City for twenty-seven years and served as president or vice-president of the cooperative's board of directors for ten, says he would like to find some Siwanoy Indians and get them to open a casino at Co-op

City. Then, he says, he would bargain for concessions from local gambling moguls like Donald Trump. Al Shapiro is only kidding; the Siwanoy are no more.

They were an Algonquian tribe, of the same linguistic family as the Menominee of Wisconsin, the Chippewa of the Plains, and the Cree of Canada. That fact about the Siwanoy is fairly certain, but others are less so, including whether they were called the Siwanoy and whether they constituted a tribe or something less defined. Indians did live in the Bronx, and historians did call them the Siwanoy; who they were is a question mark today. Archeological studies of village sites in the Bronx show that Indians had been in the area for several hundred years before the coming of the Dutch, in 1614. Middens that the Indians left behind hold evidence of their rich and varied diet—whitetail-deer bones, lobster and crab claws, quahog and mussel and conch shells, elk bones, charred walnuts, hickory shells, and deep, ancient heaps of oyster shells. Pottery found in the middens revealed an improvement in the Siwanoy's skills as potters dating from about 1550, with finely wrought and decorated pots of square-neck design. Historians don't know why the pottery improved. One guess is that new pottery styles were brought to the Siwanoy by women whom they captured, or by captured Siwanoy women who later escaped or were redeemed.

When the land here was swamp, a likely site for a shellfishing camp was on a granite outcropping at the corner of Baychester Avenue and Donizetti Place in Co-op City. Too much trouble to dynamite and cart off, the outcropping is still there, beside the busy intersection, bracketed by two Dumpster pads. A better documented Indian village site is about a five-minute drive south, past Co-op City, at the corner of Schley and Clarence Avenues. A creek, no sign of which now remains, used to come into Eastchester Bay there. Shoreline curving to a point encloses a perfect little cove with high ground above it that keeps nor'easters off your neck. Among the many bays, inlets, and coves that corrugate the eastern edge of the Bronx, the cove at the corner of Schley and Clarence is especially snug. Indians used this site seasonally, when they were collecting shellfish. Some of the shell heaps here were as deep as five feet.

In 1918, an archeologist named Alanson Skinner did a study of this site, digging carefully through the middens and the ground around them. Along with shells, animal bones, and potsherds, he found six human skeletons, including one of an infant. Artifacts like stone gorgets, fishing-net sinkers, and tools for hammering were just lying on the shore. Dug-up objects like lead bullets, bottle glass, gun flints, fragments of white clay trade pipes, and a brass arrowpoint probably cut from the side of a worn-out kettle indicated habitation in the years after trading with the Dutch had begun. In a small cache, Skinner found a collection of periwinkle-shell parts ready to be worked and smoothed into wampum beads.

The ground he excavated is now mostly covered with houses. A jetty extends the point, and on the other side of it somebody is building a marina and condominiums. The house at 3236 Schley Avenue, adjoining the point, has a side yard with a small mound in its lawn—a shell heap, perhaps. I couldn't ask, though, because 3236 appeared to be vacant. A short distance up the street are row houses. Knocked on the door at 3232 Schley, and a woman in a red sweatshirt and short bobbed hair answered. She was talking on a cordless phone and replied to me between sentences spoken into it. I asked if the row houses were new; they were. I asked what had been there before and the woman said, "An empty lot." That an Indian village had once occupied the site was news to her.

The Siwanoy also raised crops, which they planted in scattered plots on higher ground. Animals belonging to the Dutch got into the crops of many local Indians; the Indians naturally killed and ate the animals; ergo, eventually, war. In 1640, under a cruel governor, the Dutch started a widespread wiping out of Indians. A Dutch history says that sixteen hundred Indians were massacred on this governor's orders between 1643 and 1644 alone. (An exaggerated estimate, and unfair to the governor, some historians say.) For their part, the Indians descended upon and massacred unprotected settlements of Dutch. A halfhearted treaty in 1643 interrupted the killing, briefly.

Into the middle of this situation came Anne Hutchinson. (She is the Hutchinson of the river that borders Co-op City, and of the parkway.) Anne Hutchinson was a midwife and unofficial explicator of the Bible who, with her husband and children, had sailed to Boston from Lincolnshire, England, in 1634. Anne's father, a radical-tending Puritan minister, had passed on his views to her during the large amounts of time he spent in ecclesiastical disfavor and without a congregation to preach to. Soon after arriving in Boston, Anne got into trouble with the believers who led the Massachusetts Bay Colony for saying, among other heresies, that grace was not only more important than works for salvation but that you could experience grace with no mediation of Church or Bible at all. (Grace, a tricky concept, means God's favor bestowed without one's having to ask for or merit it, like a mother's love for her child.) Anne's opponents feared that, if her ideas about grace took hold, people would just sit around waiting for Heaven, and ignore the Church elders, and be ungovernable.

So the colony's leaders tried, convicted, and banished her. With some of her family and followers, Anne moved to present Rhode Island, where Roger Williams, another freethinking Massachusetts exile, had recently founded Providence. She and her family lived in nearby Portsmouth, which they helped to found; her husband died there. Hearing that Massachusetts might take over Williams's settlements, Anne decided to get away from the English altogether, and received permission from the Dutch to move to New Netherland. In 1642, Anne and seven of her children and eight other people sailed up the (now) Hutchinson River and built a cabin either on the river's Co-op City side or just across from it. Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx Borough Historian, says that her cabin most likely was on land now under the M.T.A. bus garage, just north of Co-op City. Anne's name has been associated with this part of the Bronx ever since. By the late seventeenth century, settlers were referring to land that is now Co-op City as "Hutchinson's."

The Indians did not like the Hutchinson cabin being so close to their planting grounds, and told her to move. Anne didn't; she had never had any problems with Indians, viewed them sympathetically, and opposed their mistreatment. She believed in peace. When Massachusetts and Connecticut all but exterminated the Pequots, in 1636 and 1637, she had spoken out strongly against that war. She would not even allow guns in her house. After the 1643 treaty, the Dutch soon resumed massacring Indians, and by summer the Indians were ready to retaliate against the spread-out settlements, including those in Anne's part of the Bronx. Neighbors warned her that the Indians were coming, but Anne stayed, and one late-summer afternoon a party of warriors came and killed her and almost everybody else on her place. The Indians scalped and mutilated the bodies, killed the animals, and burned down the buildings. No record exists of the bodies ever being given any burial.

Though the Indians killed six of Anne's children, they captured and spared one daughter. Anne's five other children, grown up at the time and living elsewhere, survived as well. Through these offspring, Anne became the ancestress of many notable Americans. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was Anne Hutchinson's seven-greats-grandson, and George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush are her ten-greats- and eleven-greats-grandsons. Both families descend from Edward, her firstborn. Wampage, the Siwanoy chief who is said to have killed Anne Hutchinson by his own hand, afterward changed his name to hers (or an approximation of it). Wampage lived a long time, and in treaties signed in 1654 and 1692 he apparently used the name Anne-hooke. Historians speculated that taking the name of a vanquished enemy was a Siwanoy sign of respect. Unlike Anne, Anne-hooke was buried in a grave that people identified as his. Near the ocean on Eastchester Bay, it was already washing away a hundred-some years ago. A member of the New-York Historical Society noted in 1919 that history does not say what happened to the Siwanoy, "though we learn from the church records that Indians attended the Episcopal church in Westchester as late as 1710, and that they were of good behavior during the services."

A flashy Siwanoy casino probably wouldn't fit with Co-op City's nineteen-sixties utopian design scheme anyway. Following the example of Le Corbusier, the designers of Co-op City combined its utilitarian high-rises with many acres of landscaped green space. This idea is now out of architectural fashion, but I like it. I sometimes wander the

curving paths across the lawns, often empty except for a few full-color newspaper-ad pages blowing across them. I rest at an out-of-the-way bench and look at the windows and balconies repeating themselves upward for the high-rises' twenty-four, twenty-six, or thirty-three stories. When the sun comes up (as I know from satellite photos my son finds on the Internet), it throws dramatic, film-noir shadows of the buildings far across the Bronx. From ground level, the sky around the buildings features stacked-up clouds just arrived from the ocean; seagulls creak and wheel among them. At rush hours, helicopters sit motionless over strategic points on I-95, like predator fish waiting for a minnow to tumble from the school. An asphalt path traces the Hutchinson River through the Co-op City grounds, with chain-link fence running alongside. Reeds that grow right up to the shining gray mudflats are black at the waterline, green above that, and reddish-gold at their tapered, waving tops--no different, perhaps, from what the Siwanoy used to walk through.

Grace or works; works or unmediated, self-revealed grace. Anne Hutchinson touched something explosive with that question. The Massachusetts men who banished her later exulted at her bloody end, seeing it as God's confirmation of their judgment. Undeterred, the idea of inward grace as preferable to works came back powerfully after her death and never went away. In fact, the elevation of grace was America's great theological contribution to the world. Publicly, ours became a country of good works; but privately, and really, America became the country of unearned, unmerited, predestined, self-proclaimed, all-you-have-to-do-is-be-you, glorious heavenly (or unheavenly) grace.

By which I mean, the country of cool. Cool is grace in secular form. Either you have grace or you don't; the same with cool. If you have been chosen by grace, everything you do will be suffused by grace. Likewise, if you're cool whatever you do is cool. But cool is even more rigorously exclusive than the strictest kind of grace. Those lacking grace may under some circumstances approach closer to it by sincere intention and an abundance of good works. But, if you're not cool, then, sadly, no amount of trying will make you cool. Indeed, working to become cool will actually make you more uncool. The dead-certain confidence of those who know they have grace, or cool, maddens and fascinates those who don't. Grace, as cool, is America's main export, in its music, movies, and style.

Sometimes in the mornings I ride the No. 5 subway to the Baychester Avenue stop, in the Bronx, and then I walk the half mile or so to Co-op City. (Though convenient subway service has been promised since the development began, that stop, and the Pelham Bay stop on the 6, are still about as close to Co-op City as the subway comes.) On school days, the No. 5 is full of students travelling to Harry S. Truman High School, on the Co-op City grounds. The students get off at Baychester Avenue, go down the stairs from the elevated platform, wait to file through the revolving gate, and continue to school at the *lento* pace of a church processional. They wear backpacks with pictures of the Tasmanian Devil skateboarding on them; their hair is often styled, sometimes in cornrow patterns as complicated as circuitry. Wearing two hats, with one hat facing forward and the other back, is a look I'd never noticed before. Girlfriends walk linked by the shared earphones of their iPods. Eyes half-lidded, limbs relaxed, and robed in their baggy clothes, the kids exactly personify American-made grace; i.e., cool.

Speeding forward in time, post-Anne Hutchinson: the local Indian wars ended; the Dutch ceded New Netherland to the English (had she lived, Anne wouldn't have escaped her countrymen even here); then the farmable land along the Hutchinson River, and throughout the Bronx, went to farms for almost three hundred years. Land where Co-op City is now was still farmland into the nineteen-fifties. Ken Migliorelli, who has a regular stand in the Union Square farmers' market, remembers that workmen putting I-95 through the northeast Bronx paused to let his father harvest his dandelion crop just across from the present Co-op City before they started to bulldoze. A lot of the Co-op City site, Ken Migliorelli recalls, was more or less squatters' land, where anybody who wanted to could farm. Marshy streams ran through it, some navigable by canoe. Migliorelli now farms upstate, near Tivoli, New York, where the family moved long ago.

In 1960, William Zeckendorf, that day's Donald Trump, and some other investors started an amusement park on two hundred and five acres of the land that Co-op City now occupies. They were trying for an East Coast imitation of California's Disneyland. People who were young in greater New York at the time can sing the jingle from the ad: "Mommy and Daddy, take my hand! Take me out to Freedomland." The park's name echoed the Dutch, who had called this part of the Bronx Vredelandt (Land of Peace). Perhaps inspired by an ambitious spirit endemic to the place, the developers laid out the park in the shape of the United States (the Lower Forty-eight). Freedomland had sections called the Great Chicago Fire, the Old Southwest, the Great Plains, New Orleans, etc. Unfortunately, Freedomland was a pretty ramshackle, mosquitoey place, as well as expensive and hard to get to. In 1964, the New York World's Fair came along to give it competition, and it faltered, tried to reorganize, and filed for bankruptcy. Photos and reminiscences of Freedomland are now the subject of a nostalgic Web site for the middle-aged.

Elsewhere in the Bronx lived immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe whose point of origin in America had been the Lower East Side. After getting established there, they had moved into the middle class and uptown. In the Bronx's central and southern reaches, along Morris Avenue and the Grand Concourse, they spent a few fondly remembered decades (neighbors, checkers, stoop ball, Klingshoffer's Delicatessen), until rent control caused the elegant apartment buildings to grow shabby, and poorer and newer immigrants and migrants began moving in. The city, inspired by officials like Robert Moses, decided to change its housing profile in a way that attempted to discard the "scrofulous" (Moses's word) tenements entirely. By the late nineteen-sixties, thousands of Bronx families were eager to move again.

Arthur Taub is a retired health-care consultant for the United Federation of Teachers, who came to Co-op City in 1970. He and I had coffee and talked not long ago in a diner at the Bartow Avenue shopping plaza in Co-op City. Arthur Taub has a full head of white hair and a blunt-featured, Hungarian face. To say that he is a good guy is not a value judgment but a simple description of the aura he gives off. In reminiscent mode, Arthur Taub leans his head back, closes his eyes, and speaks slowly, in a gravel-toned Bronx voice. "I was born and have lived all my life in the Bronx," he told me. "The last place we lived before here was Kingsbridge Terrace near 231st Street. My wife and I had two young daughters, and we liked the area, but the building was running down. I was paying a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month for a two-bedroom--pretty good, even for 1969--and mine was the highest rent in the building, so consider what the other tenants were paying. Some were paying seventy-five dollars, or fifty-nine. At those rents, the landlord couldn't afford to maintain it. Frequently in the winter we had no heat, and we'd have to find other places to stay. 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."

Here the paths to utopia ran through bureaucracy. The beginnings of Co-op City involved print so fine as to be microscopic, and tape so red you needed dark glasses to view it full on. Co-op City's basic purpose was to keep middle-class people like Arthur Taub from moving to the suburbs. The underlying philosophical ethos its developers shared was a left-wing idealism--real, feigned, or both, depending on whom you ask. A nonprofit organization called the United Housing Foundation designed and sponsored the project. Abraham E. Kazan, the president of the U.H.F., declared, "I am a coöperator, interested only in building the coöperative commonwealth." Even today, residents of Co-op City are referred to not as tenants or shareholders but as coöperators. The U.H.F. was created in the fifties by leaders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America to build housing for union members. Jacob S. Potofsky, the head of the A.C.W.A., said that "all races, creeds, and colors" would live in Co-op City. The U.H.F. had already built a number of New York housing projects, including Rochdale Village, an integrated five-thousand-eight-hundred-and-sixty-unit development in Queens.

Most of the money for the Co-op City project came from the New York State Housing Finance Agency. The H.F.A. gave the U.H.F. a mortgage of two hundred and sixty-one million dollars, a sum larger than all the other mortgages

it had ever given, put together. The H.F.A. made the loan under the state's Mitchell-Lama program, devised by the legislature in 1955 as a response to middle-class flight from New York. Mitchell-Lama loans built and subsidized apartment complexes for people who earned too much to qualify for public housing but not enough to afford a decent place in the city at market rates.

The rest of the Co-op City project's construction cost, estimated at the time to be two hundred and ninety-three million dollars, came from money paid by the coöperators themselves for shares in the coöperative. Each family paid a purchase price of about four hundred and fifty dollars a room for apartments from two rooms to as large as six. About three thousand dollars for a brand-new six-room apartment could hardly be improved upon in the city even then. The shareholders also paid a very reasonable monthly maintenance fee based on apartment size. A big restriction, however, was that the shareholders could not sell their apartments except back to the co-op. Under different arrangements, the original purchase price would have been called a security deposit or key money, and the maintenance rent. Technically, though, the apartments were (and are) the property of the shareholders.

If you've seen Soviet-era apartment complexes in Russia or Eastern Europe, Co-op City looks like them. They have the same stark, modernist architecture, the same lonesome open spaces between the buildings, same walkways, same benches. (The Soviet-built high-rises do generally appear to be in much worse shape than Co-op City.) Coincidentally, some of the men most important to Co-op City's founding came from Russia to America when they were young. Abraham Kazan, of the U.H.F., arrived in New York from Kiev in 1904; Jacob Potofsky, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, was born in Radomyshl; and Herman J. Jessor, the chief architect of Co-op City and other U.H.F. projects, emigrated from Russia when he was twelve. Nowadays, it is hard to remember how taken for granted the spirit of socialism and coöperative progressivism used to be in certain influential circles in America--it's as if someone had flipped a switch in about 1975 and an entire way of thinking was gone. Like the Soviet high-rise projects, Co-op City is a survival from a more collectivist age into today's world of everyman-for-himself.

New York's unions, in particular, were stronger when Co-op City began. The project was supposed to be a complete union shop--you couldn't even move in without union movers--and the heads of many major unions sat on the Co-op City board of directors. Perhaps my favorite Woody Allen joke is in his movie "Sleeper," in the scene when the Sleeper, Woody Allen's character, who has been frozen in 1973, is thawed out two hundred years later. Scientists of the future are debriefing him, and they tell him that America is no more, and he asks what happened, and one of the scientists says, "According to history, over a hundred years ago a man named Albert Shanker got ahold of a nuclear warhead." Albert Shanker was the skinny, narrow-tie-wearing, bespectacled, rumped, dogged, always-in-the-news president of the United Federation of Teachers in New York. He served on the board of Co-op City in the seventies and died in 1997. As it happened, Albert Shanker was a friend of Arthur Taub. "Albert loved that joke!" Arthur Taub said when I asked him about it.

The first families moved into Co-op City on December 10, 1968, a day so cold that it froze the engine block of the truck bringing the belongings of Phil and Ann Herskowitz and their two children to 900 Baychester Avenue--Building One. The project's early occupants referred to themselves as pioneers. Their first February, a blizzard hit the city and stranded a lot of drivers on the interstate nearby, and the hardy few then in Building One hosted hundreds of drivers who had left their cars. "In those years, there was basically nothing here," Arthur Taub remembers. "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 a 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."

As the buildings were finished, more families moved in, floor by floor. So many came from the southern part of the

Bronx that that area's racial and financial picture changed. Co-op City offered big apartments, great views, walk-in closets, parquet floors, free heat and utilities. From May to October, all the buildings enjoyed central air-conditioning; these were apartments for people not expected to own summer homes. Joseph and Amelia Pahmer moved in; he was a baker in the Bulova Watch Company employee cafeteria. So did Henry Zipper, a business agent for the Department of Sanitation, and his wife, Eva. Also, Irving Witkin, the dean of boys at George Washington High School in Manhattan, and Mrs. Witkin. New arrival Solly Kraska was a production man in the ladies'-suit and-coat business. Mrs. Hilowitz came with her husband, Nathan, who worked for Grumman Aerospace on Long Island. Arthur Plutzer, Sam Fenster, Mr. and Mrs. Morris Grobdruck, Abraham and Frieda Yellin, Mr. and Mrs. Morris Arbor, Harvey Josephowitz, Sol Oratofsky, and Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Group all moved to Co-op City in the early years.

Jewish families made up at least three-fourths of Co-op City's original population. Some old-timers say the number was even higher, but the co-op's management would not give out the real figure so as not to seem too far away from the stated goal of diversity. The remaining twenty-five or fifteen per cent consisted of blacks, Latinos, Italians, Irish, and almost no Wasps. The pioneer population was in any event a lively and enthusiastic bunch, forming clubs of all kinds (fishing, astronomy, belly dancing) and jumping into the civic life of their coop. Arthur Taub joined a community-action group in his building which grew out of discussions people had in the laundry rooms while doing their wash. Boosters of the co-op noted proudly that serious crime did not exist in the project during the early years, and what crimes there were tended to be purse snatchings and other petty theft against the place's many elderly. The boast does need a small asterisk, however; among those who moved to Co-op City in the early years were Mr. Berkowitz and his son, David. Some years after moving out, David Berkowitz became Son of Sam, a famous murderer in the recent history of New York.

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.

Even before then, many of Co-op City's coöperators had begun to wonder if they might have been screwed. First, rumors said that the project's cost had risen and the coöperators' maintenance charges soon would, too. The defects in the buildings quickly became visible for anybody to see: In retrospect, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the bait and switch was on. While people were still moving in, the monthly maintenance fees stayed at their attractively low levels--\$23.02 a room, then \$31.46 a room, for a top total of under two hundred dollars for a six-room apartment. When the thirty-five buildings and fifteen thousand-plus apartments were almost filled, Co-op City management announced a maintenance increase of twenty-five per cent over the next two years, to be followed by an increase of fifty-seven per cent over the following three.

In other words, the maintenance was going up eighty-two per cent, or almost doubling in five years. Of the sixty thousand then living in Co-op City, more than twelve thousand were retirees on fixed incomes. This affordable

place to live, arrived at with some trouble and a sense of last resort, formed the basis of household economies that were often calculated to the cent. For the young working people with families, the maintenance increase would mean complicated and unwelcome rearrangements in their lives. Everybody knew what a tip-off the construction had been; now management expected them to pay the tab. Cornered into a fight, the residents of Co-op City ended up waging a minor revolution for self-determination--against the project's creators and management, against the powers of the city and the state, and against generally unsympathetic public opinion--that deserves somewhere a modest statue of its own.

Nothing if not organized, the coöperators (many disliked that term, from seeing it too often in the "Dear Cooperators" salutation at the head of ominous letters from management) formed a steering committee. It would be known afterward as Steering Committee I. Logically, the first thing the committee did was sue. Somebody's son-in-law was the accountant for Louis Nizer, well known as a divorce lawyer for movie stars. Nizer met with members of the steering committee in his Manhattan office, sort of enthroned on a dais that made him look taller than his actual height, which was not much above five feet. After listening to their story, he agreed to take their case for the bargain price of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, or ten dollars a family. Nizer brought suit for fraud against the United Housing Foundation, the Housing Finance Agency, and Community Services, Inc., the for-profit arm of the U.H.F., which had directed the construction. The suit alleged that the defendants had misrepresented the financial status of the co-op when selling stock to shareholders with intent to defraud. The defendants hired their own big gun, Simon Rifkind, a former federal district-court judge.

Because stock fraud is a federal crime, the case went to federal district court, where the judge found for the defendants. Then a circuit-court judge reversed the decision, and the defendants appealed to the Supreme Court. It agreed to hear the case and, with some dispatch, did, finding (in effect) for the defendants by a ruling of lack of jurisdiction. Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., for the majority, wrote that the sale of stock in a co-op is not subject to federal regulation because co-op shares and shares of stock in a company are fundamentally not the same: the first is bought for personal use of the purchaser, the second for return on investment dependent on the efforts of others. Experts had warned that, if the Co-op City residents won, the whole structure of coöperative housing would fall apart from fear of similar suits by unhappy tenants.

While the lawsuit was going on, the shareholders formed Steering Committee II, whose purpose was to seek legislative redress in Albany. Its efforts went essentially nowhere. Next, they set up Steering Committee III, which eventually hit on the idea of organizing a rent strike of the whole co-op. Elected president of Steering Committee III was a thirty-two-year-old shareholder named Charlie Rosen.

Then Charlie Rosen was a skinny chain-smoker with bushy dark hair. Now he no longer smokes, and the extra pounds attendant on quitting have filled him out, and his hair is white, wavy, and distinguished. At the time of the strike, he was working as a typographer on the production floor of the Post. His voice still seems pitched to be heard above the sound of machinery, and his manner is often broad and Zero Mostelian. He and I talked for eight or ten hours in the kitchen of his Co-op City apartment, among other places, while he enlarged on Co-op City's politics, and on human events in general, with affectionate scorn. Once, I asked in passing about Abraham Kazan, the U.H.F. president, and about Kazan's idealistic dream of building the coöperative commonwealth. Rosen responded with such a scourging of Abe Kazan and all other bigwig hypocrite betrayers of the working class that I wished I had phrased the question in a more neutral way. "Ian! Ian!" he cried. "Don't you know what these people are?! Where are you from?!"

To describe the rent strike and his part in it, Rosen began back in the late nineteenth century, when his father was a boy in Warsaw. He described how his father learned to read by studying anarchist literature, and became an anarchist, then a Communist, then moved to America; and how his father was kicked out of the Communist Party

after starting a small garment shop here, because owners weren't allowed to become Party members; and how he was a knitter, setting up knitting machines in the garment district, working on them from underneath on his back on a skid; and how his mother grew up in the city of Kamenets-Podolski, in Ukraine, and had to hide in her house during pogroms, and how she and other family members got away to Bucharest and walked from there to Antwerp, and then took a ship to America; and how she was a radical Socialist Zionist, and went to Palestine, and fell in love with an Arab, and decided that Zionism was racism, and came back to America, and became a passementerie worker (a worker who does garment piecework, like tassels or fringe, by hand); and how she always worked with her hands moving quickly and a cigarette hanging from the side of her mouth; and how she made the tassels on the curtain at the Metropolitan Opera, and how proud the family was of that;

and how she was a Stalinist, even after 1939, as well as a member of the passementerie workers' union; and how she met his father, who was by then the president of the Knit Goods Workers' Union; and how he, Charlie (real name: Shachna), was born, and his brother, Jake; and how no language but Yiddish was spoken in the home, and how for his family about the worst thing a person could be was a Trotskyite, and how they loathed exploiter bosses and fake Socialists; and how he, Charlie, went to public schools, and then to many colleges, and how he found the classes and the other students at college mostly out of touch with the world and ridiculous, so he never got a degree; and how he became a Communist, and visited the Soviet Union, and met Khrushchev; and how he thought hippies were completely fake radicals, and fools to boot, with their ridiculous drugs, getting arrested for something so stupid when there were many real and serious things to get arrested for,

and how he became a typographer, and worked the lobster shift (twelve-thirty to seven in the morning); and how he met his wife, Lynn, in a Ukrainian folk-dancing club of which he was the only Jewish member, and how he and Lynn got married, and were living on the Upper West Side in a little place, and wanted to start a family; and how she heard about Co-op City, but he was reluctant at first because he thought of the Bronx as a place you come from, not move to, and how ruddy and dismissively the Co-op City personnel treated them and other prospective buyers when he and Lynn went to see about a place, but he didn't care about that or about all the coöperative baloney in the literature, because he just wanted a cheap place to live like anybody else, and this looked like it; and how they paid the two thousand-plus for a five-room apartment with an advance on a small inheritance from Lynn's grandmother; and how they moved on December 31, 1970, into Apartment E on the seventh floor of Building Twenty-two A; and how delighted they were with all the space and light; and how Lynn became pregnant soon; and how they had one kid and another on the way when the new maintenance increases were announced; and how he was elected the chairman of his building's shareholder organization; and how, when the shareholders decided to fight the increases, he knew just who the enemy was and what the strategy should be.

Well, it was quite a strike. It lasted for thirteen months--from June of 1975 to July of 1976. When the members of the United Housing Foundation on the co-op's board of directors saw it coming, they resigned; having dodged the fraud lawsuit, the U.H.F. could walk away in the clear. The union leaders and shareholders on the board resigned, too, and that left no one to run the co-op except the state, inescapably involved by virtue of the fact that the co-op owed it (that is, the H.F.A.) hundreds of millions of dollars. Lee Goodwin, the state commissioner of the Division of Housing and Community Renewal, set about to break the strike and collect the withheld money; she said that its continued nonpayment was imperilling the H.F.A.'s liquidity. First off, the state got a court order enjoining the strikers from striking. When the steering-committee members understood that violating the injunction could mean jail sentences, many of them resigned. Ten members, however, remained, and continued violating the injunction assiduously.

Special weapons that seem to frighten the middle class more than the very rich or the very poor were deployed. The bank accounts of all strike leaders were frozen, and so for the next year they could apply for no loans and had to pay all their bills in cash. Along with that came the heavier artillery: a co-op-wide foreclosure, and evictions to

follow. Between eighty and ninety per cent of the co-op had joined the strike; eviction threatened more than thirteen thousand families. An official of the H.F.A. noted that this would be "the largest single residential-foreclosure action in history." Rosen told his fellow-strikers that never in a million years would the state dare to evict the twelve thousand five hundred elderly retirees among them. He said that crowds would immediately surround the apartments targeted for eviction and make removal impossible. ("But all they had to do was find a moment when no one was looking and evict just one family," Rosen says now, "and everybody else would have been so petrified they would have called off the strike. I still don't understand why Lee Goodwin didn't do that.")

A few months after the strike began, the members of the steering committee stood trial in Bronx Supreme Court on contempt charges for violating the injunction. Thousands of Co-op City people came to the trial, filling the courtroom and massing on the steps and sidewalks outside. The strike leaders' defense described the thieves' bazaar of the place's construction, a failure for which the state, in its supervisory role, was ultimately responsible. About the charges themselves the defendants had little to say, being guilty of them. Each steering-committee member went through hours of questioning on the stand. At the mention of jail time, the committee member Murray Lerner, a retired furrier with thick glasses, stood up and began to shout, "When I'm in jail, I demand kosher food!" Uproar and applause ensued. (Rosen: "And Murray didn't even keep kosher. He was a Communist from way back.") Unsurprisingly, the judge ruled against the strikers. He fined the steering committee two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, plus five thousand dollars a day as long as the strike continued. He fined the individual members twenty-five thousand dollars each, plus a thousand dollars a day. Rosen told the judge he'd pay the fines first thing after his Master Charge bill.

"There wasn't a person among us who wasn't scared," the committee member Ben Cirlin says. "We were just ordinary working people--a shoe salesman, a lady who ran a day-care center, an electrician, a production manager at a factory. I drive a school bus for handicapped kids. All of us were wondering what we'd got ourselves into. Every time I saw a police car around my building, I was afraid they'd come for me. My wife and I had stuff ready to take in case I was suddenly hauled away. But Charlie was amazing. He's a brilliant judge of people, he understood how people thought. Every day there was some new frightening development. I wish I had as much hair on my head as they served me injunctions. When we were in despair, which happened often, Charlie could pick us up with an inspiring talk or a funny remark. Charlie was the core of everything."

Nobody at the higher levels of power stood on the strikers' side. The governor, Hugh Carey, stayed aloof and waited for the state to crush them. The Bronx Democratic machine worked against them openly and otherwise; its Democratic club, the largest in the city, conspicuously did not back the strike. The Times, exasperated and fed up, said in an editorial, "The reality which the rebellious tenants at Co-op City seem unwilling to face is that the state cannot grant them additional subsidy, not only because its own funds are overcommitted but because there is no justification for giving them a position even more favored than the one they now enjoy." The Wall Street Journal rooted for eviction, urging the state to "make an example of the strikers. Con Edison let itself be maneuvered into putting up big red-lettered posters all over the complex one winter day threatening to turn off the electricity. For purposes of persuasion, the state had let the bill slide. To pay it, strikers brought hefty bags of residents' personal checks in shopping carts to Con Ed's Manhattan headquarters, along with the TV news.

At one point, the state published a list of every shareholder whose maintenance had not been paid, and who was thus subject to eviction. The list, which ran to many columns of tiny legal type, was bound into a book and taped to the door of every offender. At no small expense, tens of thousands of additional copies filled the building lobbies and arrived at shareholders' boxes by mail. Rosen called a meeting on the Greenway--the large central meadow where the strikers often assembled for big gatherings--and, as people thumbed through the accusing pages looking for their names, he told them they should be proud to be in that book, not scared. "How many times in your life can you say you have proof that you stood up for something you know is right?" Rosen asked. "This book is the proof--

when even your enemies say you didn't back down. Being in this book is a badge of honor."

The short answer to how all this resolved itself is: Mario Cuomo. He and Rosen got together through back channels with the help of a well-connected writer whose wife's parents lived in Co-op City, and Robert Abrams, the Bronx Borough President. Cuomo was New York's secretary of state at the time. Rosen liked Cuomo, and vice versa; Rosen still has a comically circumlocutory letter Cuomo wrote him hanging on his wall. The rapport between the two began negotiations that led to an agreement that Cuomo eventually persuaded the state to accept. The strikers received amnesty and removal of all fines. They agreed to turn over the withheld checks and to continue mortgage payments to the H.F.A. in the future. Rosen and company produced the bags and boxes of checks, which had been hidden in many places, including friends' attics and the trunk of Rosen's car. The paper alone weighed almost a ton.

Most important, the state agreed to yield the power of running the co-op to the shareholders. Before, the shares that the shareholders held were of only an advisory nature. The class-A shares, the voting shares, were in the hands of the U.H.F., which meant Abe Kazan's hands (and, after his death, his successor's). In practice, the U.H.F. had made all the major decisions about managing the co-op. Per the new agreement, a board of directors elected by the shareholders would henceforth be in charge, and the co-op would be a true co-op, run democratically. For six months after the new setup began, the maintenance increases that were the original *casus belli* were to be suspended. The shareholders hoped that more economical management would make the increases unnecessary.

With jujitsu skill, the Co-op City residents had taken weakness--their lack of resources, shortage of options, the fact that many of them were elderly--and converted it to strength. They were, after all, unevictable. Their powerful opponents had disregarded and underestimated them, and had been surprised. Lee Goodwin, the housing commissioner defeated in her struggle with them, resigned. The state, still implicated in the place's success or failure by its (now) four-hundred-and-thirty-six-million-dollar H.F.A. mortgage, eventually chipped in with hundreds of millions toward repairs. The parking garages had begun to fall apart, the settling of ground-fill sand had caused buried pipes to break, and many of the laundry rooms, closed during the strike, had been vandalized. And that was just the beginning. After six months of shareholder control, the co-op's new management admitted that maintenance increases were unavoidable. Some shareholders called this a betrayal, but all went along.

The co-op was late on mortgage payments and thrashed through thickets of unpaid state and city real-estate taxes. Many of those, by one arrangement or another, were reduced or waived. During a period of unfriendliness between the co-op and the city, Mayor Ed Koch briefly tried the foreclosure route again. It proved as ineffectual as before. Elections for co-op-board members sometimes became ad-hominem wrangles; almost by tradition, an election would be described as the nastiest one yet. Acrimonious disputes continue to this day. "In a democracy, people have the right to make wrong decisions," Rosen says, undiscouraged. "We're still better off for having the right to be free."

Back when the planning for Co-op City was going on, Herman Badillo, the Bronx Borough President, told Mayor John Lindsay, "Everybody knows that the word 'co-op' is a synonym for 'Jewish housing.'... Puerto Ricans and Hispanics don't understand co-ops and don't have the money for co-ops, and neither do blacks ... If you're building a co-op, if you don't have any rental apartments, you are, in effect, creating a white enclave." He warned that the move of so many whites from their former Bronx neighborhoods to Co-op City would devastate the borough. He was right about that. For some years after the opening of Co-op City, apartment buildings in other parts of the Bronx disintegrated--once, vividly, when a building within sight of Yankee Stadium caught fire and sent a plume of smoke skyward during a nationally televised baseball game.

But, as for the white enclave, Co-op City's original population did not stay the same for long. A rabbi said that he

was losing his Co-op City congregation to "mortality, move-outs, and Miami Beach." Despite the supposed intrinsic Jewishness of co-ops, the families who moved into the newly vacated apartments tended to be black or Latino. This trend in new arrivals has continued: today, black and Latino families are about three-quarters of the population of Co-op City.

Civic participation in the co-op is not as widespread as in the early days. Fewer people vote in board elections than used to. The Greenway, where the rent-strike meetings were and where ten thousand once assembled to hear Charlie Rosen, had to be paved over for parking in 2003; the continued decay of the parking garages left not much choice. The small-town atmosphere some remember from the strike has become subtler. I think it's still there, though. Sometimes when I'm going back from Co-op City to midtown I take the Bronx M7 bus, which runs express all the way to its first stop in Manhattan, at 122nd Street near Second. During most of its existence, Co-op City has had good express-bus service. On weekday mornings, when people are drowsing slumped together on their commute, immensities of city infrastructure go by the windows like shadows, and the bus is as comfy as a baby carriage. Then or on later buses, the passengers don't seem to talk a lot. A sense of shared purpose and unforced companionship balances against the big-city custom of anonymity. Perhaps privacy, that gift bestowed by the city (according to E. B. White), has seeped into this young housing project with age.

One of Abraham Kazan's obituaries quoted an answer he often made to critics of his housing projects: "We are not only demolishing rat-traps and building decent homes, we are giving people the opportunity to let the sun into their apartments and enjoy gardens and trees." The first time I walked around in an empty apartment in a Co-op City high-rise, I saw what he meant about the sun. Mike Miller, a sales representative for Riverbay (the shareholder-run corporation that oversees Co-op City), told me that two of the three different high-rise configurations in the project are designed so that every apartment has windows on at least two sides. Places in the apartment, when I stood in them, had the seeming airiness of perches in the sky. With other high-rises full of similar apartments all around, the effect is of a well-laid-out stadium where all the spectators congratulate themselves on what good seats they have. Looking from the window, I was again reminded of places I've seen in Russia--of old monuments from the war, of park benches around a statue of Lenin's wife, of a little plaque on the wall of a log house commemorating the Stakhanovite hero farmworker who once lived there. Certain moments of individual idealism may be so pure that, no matter what history does afterward, they leave some substantial good behind.

Today, the president of Co-op City's board of directors is a short, energetic first-grade teacher named Leticia Morales. She holds an M.S. in bilingual education and has a daughter, two sons, and two granddaughters. She divides her time between job, family, and her duties as president (an unpaid position) of a co-op with an annual budget of a hundred and sixty-five million dollars. Her temperament is that of the ideal jury forewoman--calm, consensus-minded, sweet-voiced, fair. She just won reelection, and what she wants to do during the next year or two is grand. For complicated reasons involving Abe Kazan's nephew and a grudge against Con Ed, Kazan built an entire power plant as part of the original Co-op City complex, and for even more complicated reasons it has never generated one watt of electrical power. Leticia Morales says that when the startup process is complete, in 2008, the power plant will be working, finally; she says that it will save the co-op millions a year in energy bills, and more when it begins to sell some of the power back to Con Ed.

Also, Metro North trains that run along the shore to places like Darien and Norwalk go right by Co-op City. Leticia Morales is in talks to persuade Metro North to stop there; she points out that her community has a larger population than many commuter towns. A station would need to be built. From it the trip would be about thirty minutes to midtown. Also, Co-op City has a lot of kids with nothing to do after school. Crime has gone down in the project since 2001, but there is still a crime problem. In December, police and federal agents arrested fourteen young men for selling handguns and other weapons on Co-op City grounds. Leticia Morales would love to open a youth center in one of several locations she has in mind in or near Co-op City. And, as part of the co-op's never-ending cycle of

repairs, she also will begin replacing most of its windows, of which there are about a hundred and thirty-five thousand, along with about six thousand terrace doors.

"This is just a beautiful place to live," she told me. "We have people from everywhere, more than sixty thousand working people and retired people with beautiful values. We are the largest naturally occurring retirement community in the world. When all of these different people come together, it's--how can I tell you? It's like the moment of silence we had on the Greenway after 9/11. We bring a great richness to each other."

Al Shapiro, the longtime Co-op City official who joked about the Siwanoy casino, seems world-wearier and gloomier than she. The gloom and weariness turn out to be faux, however--a manner put on to mask a deep fervor.

"It's incredible how decent most folks are here," Al Shapiro said. "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."

Normally, the previous sentence would be the conclusion, but there's one other thing: privatization. After twenty years, Mitchell-Lama projects that have paid off their state loans are allowed to privatize. If a two-thirds majority of the shareholders in a Mitchell-Lama co-op agree, they can assume full ownership of their apartments and, as they wish, sell them for what the market will pay. A portion of the proceeds--called a flip tax"--goes back to the project's management; the seller keeps the rest. Here is where big dollar signs come in. At former Mitchell-Lama projects in other parts of the city, apartments have sold for many hundreds of thousands. Were Co-op City to privatize, the current shareholders, whose equity in their apartments is now effectively zero, would gain equity worth a lot of money.

This is, of course, a fraught issue for the co-op. For a long time after the twenty-year period had passed, it took no action on privatization. Only in the last couple of years have people started to talk seriously about it. Opponents of the idea say that privatization goes against the whole purpose of Co-op City, that it will cause maintenance charges to rise, that wealthier people will move in, that tax abatements and other benefits of Mitchell-Lama status will be lost, and that the middle-class workers the place was designed for will again be shut out of New York housing. A recent report by the city revealed what an official called "a staggering loss of affordable housing, largely because of the number of apartments leaving Mitchell-Lama over the past few years.

Supporters of privatization say that maintenance charges are going to go up anyway--with the H.F.A. finally paid off, Co-op City has a new, four-hundred-and-eighty-million-dollar bank-financed mortgage, and higher interest payments to go with it. They say that the money brought in by the flip tax would actually cause maintenance to go down, that the place is probably going to privatize anyway and there's no point in paying now for some future seller's profit, that the equity gained would be useful for financing kids' college educations. Last year, the co-op voted, fifty-five to forty-five per cent, to look into the question and to make a final decision in five years.

After the strike, Charlie Rosen served as the board of directors' first shareholder chairman. Later, he became the head of the Gloria Wise Boys and Girls Club, an organization that runs programs for kids and seniors throughout the Bronx. Last year, after reports that his development director had made an improper loan of eight hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars to Air America Radio, and the city and state stepped up an investigation of the club's finances, Rosen had to resign. He is now retired, and he takes an aficionado's interest in the doings of the co-op. Given his leftist past, he might be expected to oppose privatization, but he's undecided. "It's an argument with morality on both sides," Rosen said. "There's the income from the flip tax, the equity, the motivation to fix up your apartment, the ability to pass it on as an asset to your children. On the other hand, where are the Charlie and Lynn

Rosens of today going to find a place in New York? It's interesting, though, that if privatization went through, you're talking about seventy-two thousand rooms at an estimated fifty thousand dollars a room. With the people who are living here now, that would be the largest transfer of real-estate wealth to people of color in U.S. history."

I was walking the curving paths of Co-op City not long ago when a couple came unhurriedly the other way. I said hello, they answered cordially, and we talked. They introduced themselves as Albert and Merdell Buckham. They said they had lived in Co-op City since 1990. Both are retired home-health-care aides. Albert assisted disabled people, and before that worked for thirty years for the Department of Sanitation in Montego Bay, Jamaica. He has a rough complexion and light-brown eyes. He wore a Mets cap, blue and orange. Merdell is wide, with a broadly smiling face, and she wore a tight knit cap from which a few curls peeked out. I asked what they thought of privatization, and they laughed. "Who's going to pay t'ree hundred t'ousand dollar for a one-bedroom apartment with elevators not workin', columns all swell up with moisture, laundromat closed?" Merdell Buckham asked.

"We would lose the senior-citizen benefits, then rich people move in, poor move out, rents go up. I get eighty-six dollars a month in pension!" Albert Buckham said. "And my pension sixty-eight dollars a month!" Merdell said. They laughed again. "Many years I was takin' care of this nice Jewish lady on Long Island," Merdell went on. "I pray to God for that lady every night."

"This used to be a quiet, nice place to live," Albert said. "But not now. They voted the good people out and the bad ones in."

"Now we have the yout's runnin' around, stearin', shootin', sellin' drugs," Merdell said. "But the police here are good, goin' upstairs, downstairs, in the lobby. I asked God to guide dem in findin' dem criminals. But I soon don't care, because we're movin' in t'ree months, back to Jamaica, and when I get there it will be hot!" (Great laughter.)

"We got fourteen children living, in the Bronx, New Jersey, Delaware, Philadelphia, so we will come and go," Albert said.

"I got fourteen children, and I don't want to be no burden to anybody!" Merdell said. "In Jamaica I'll live inexpensive, walk barefoot, keep chickens, plant t'ings in the eart'. Nobody has to take care of me. And when my time come I want God to take me home. He made me, and he can take me home."

PHOTO (COLOR): The basic purpose of the largest co-op complex in America was to keep middle-class people from moving to the suburbs.

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By Ian Frazier

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