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Blackwell's Almanac

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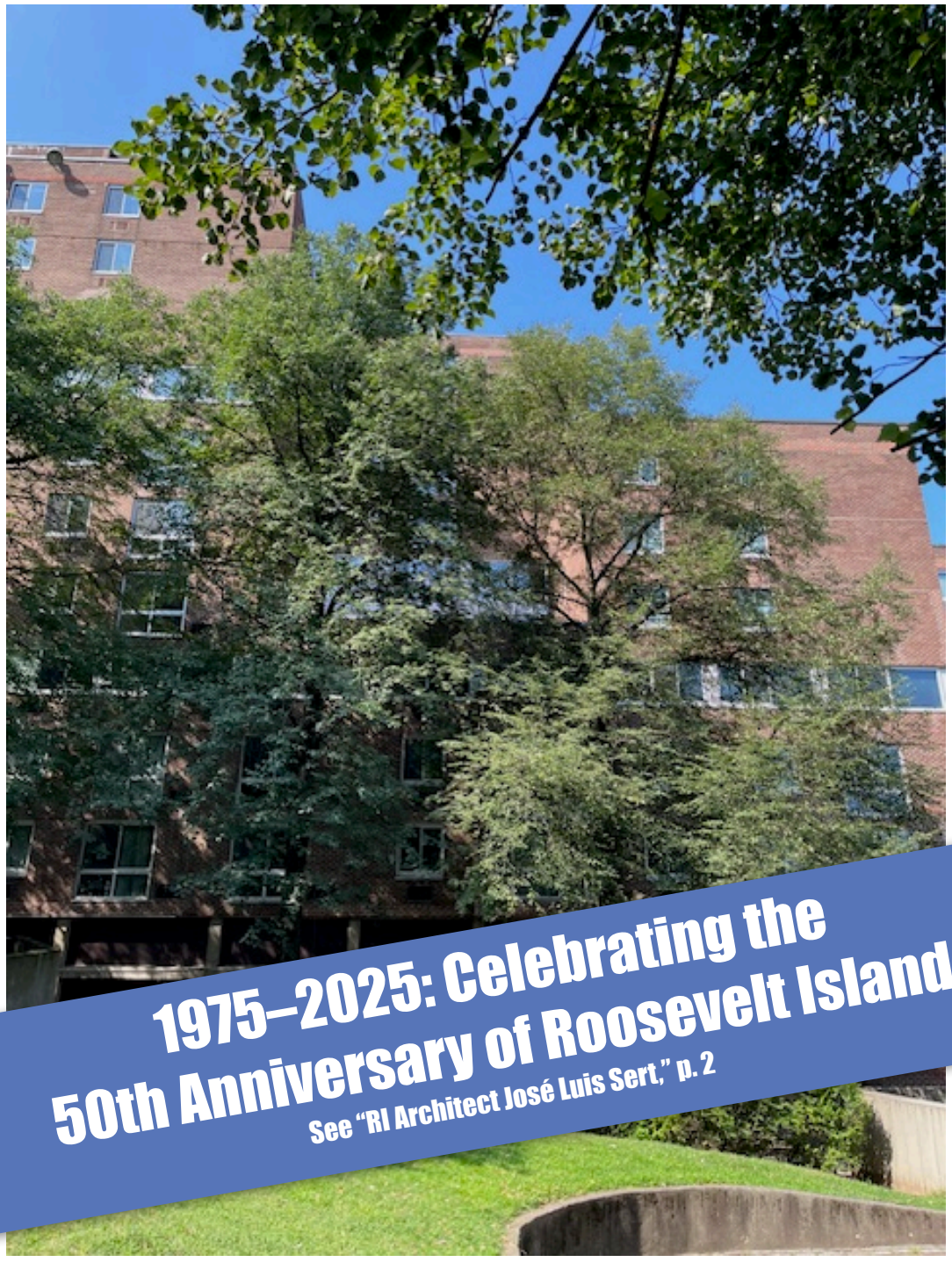

1975–2025: Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Roosevelt Island

See "RI Architect José Luis Sert," p. 2

Westview residents gaze out on the lush greenery in the building's courtyard, a testament to José Luis Sert's design principles.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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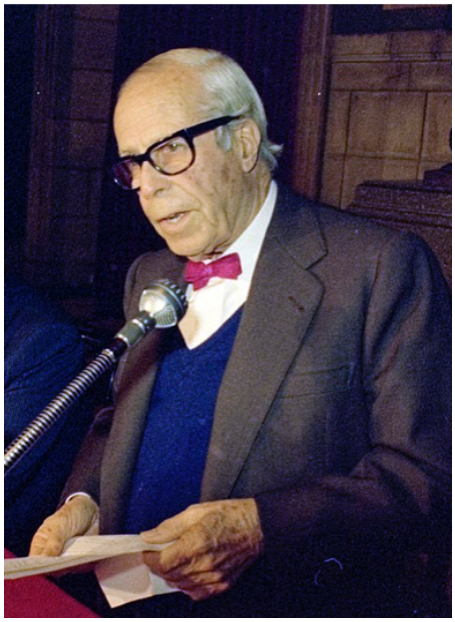
ROOSEVELT ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY EST. 1976

Island Icons

RI Architect José Luis Sert

In the last issue of "Blackwell's Almanac," we learned that the design of Eastwood (now Roosevelt Landings) and Westview was awarded to the Cambridge architectural firm of Sert, Jackson and Associates. It was hardly a difficult choice. Over the course of 50 years, José Luis Sert helped reshape architecture to reflect how people and neighborhoods actually live. This humanistic perspective ultimately spread worldwide, making Sert one of the most influential architects of the 20th century.



José Luis Sert in 1981 (1902–1983). en.wikipedia.org.

Sert spent 16 years of his life as Dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard and consultant to the Harvard Planning Office. He also designed a number of iconic buildings on the Harvard campus. So tight, in fact, was his association with Harvard, he is often thought of as an American architect. Spain would object. Although a naturalized American citizen, he was born Josep Lluis Sert in Barcelona, Catalonia, in 1902. His initial training was at Barcelona's Escola Superior d'Arquitectura and he set up his own studio in that city in 1929.

Architect Without Borders

Nevertheless, he became the most international of Spain's modern architects. His first foray into the wider world was an internship with Le Corbusier in Paris. While he spent less than a year there, few would argue that he wasn't influenced by this leading figure of the Modern Movement to embrace functionality and efficiency (rationalism) over traditional decorative styles. This principle surely prevailed when Sert created his design for the Pavilion for the Spanish Republic at the Paris World's Fair of 1937. Politically, it was a powerful symbol of the Spanish Republic during the country's Civil War against fascism. Functionally, its modular design—post and lintel with lightweight tent material stretched above and adjustable walls—was an eye-opening departure from the monumental structures of other pavilions. Spaces were flexible to accommodate exhibitions, performances and other cultural events. And Sert's lifelong interest in art and its integration into architecture led to the commission and prominent displays of such iconic works as Picasso's "Guernica" and Calder's "Mercury Fountain."

Neither Le Corbusier's influence nor Sert's internationalism stopped there. The Catalán architect became deeply involved in CIAM (Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne), an organization founded by Le

A model of Sert's Pavilion for the Spanish Republic at the Paris World's Fair of 1937. artsandculture.google.com.

Corbusier. Its mission was to advocate for modern architecture and urban planning principles. As a leader of CIAM and later its president, Sert emphasized the need for modern architecture to address social and environmental concerns. His seminal text, "Can Our Cities Survive?", written in 1942, challenged architecture to incorporate such basic human rights as access to fresh air, sunlight and green spaces in urban environments. The document argued further that the only remedy for the oppressive existence of city dwellers was to focus on neighborhood dynamics: dwelling, work, recreation and transportation. To quote Sert, "Considered on its smallest scale, the neighborhood unit would be composed of the dwellings required to house a sufficient number of people to support an elementary school." Familiar image? One could almost conclude that Sert and Roosevelt Island were a predestined match.

But before his commission for Roosevelt Island, there were many other notable works. Sert's first socially significant project was the Barcelona Anti-Tubercular Dispensary built in 1935. Though it was early in his career, he was already experimenting with nature and indoor/outdoor spaces. The double-winged structure enclosed an open courtyard with trees, thus providing a poor population with a restorative "oasis" amid urban chaos.

In Exile

Sadly for Barcelona, Sert, a liberal, was banned from practicing architecture in Franco's Spain and moved to New York in 1939. In his first years in the city, he was a partner in Town Planning Associates, creating numerous urban plans for cities in Latin America. His master plans for locations in Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba demonstrated his belief in human-centered urbanism, emphasizing pedestrian-friendly environments, public spaces and civic life, and the incorporation of natural landscape features into the urban building scheme. In his large groupings of houses, he made prominent use of patios, terraces, whitewashed walls and other aspects of Mediterranean architecture. And against his adherence to a rigorous geometric modernism, he began frequently adding a playful counterpoint: a dash of saturated color that set his work apart from the cooler, more austere designs of other modernists.

In terms of materials, Sert experimented with concrete, glass and steel and did so in such a way that they complemented decorative elements. For example, he chose to embellish buildings and public spaces with mosaics, murals and sculptural reliefs, thus making art more accessible and integral to daily life.

In 1953, Sert embarked on arguably the most celebrated portion of his career. First he became Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he established the world's first degree program in urban design; integrated the programs of architecture, planning, landscape and urban design; and, as professor of architecture, taught many of the next generation's leading architects. He subsequently founded his own architectural studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that some years later, in collaboration with Huson Jackson, became Sert, Jackson and Associates.

Works Here and Abroad

The studio designed many well-known projects, including at Harvard: the Holyoke Center (now Smith Campus Center), a modernist landmark characterized by bold concrete forms and modular design principles; Peabody Terrace Married

Students' Housing, in which a cluster of high-rise and low-rise apartment buildings are harmoniously connected with each other; the Center for the Study of World Religions; and the Undergraduate Science Center. Collectively, these modernist mixes of glass, metal and masonry put their stamp on the postwar Harvard campus in the same way Georgian buildings of the 1920s had characterized it in an earlier era.

The Smith Campus Center exemplifies the modernist architecture and influence of Sert on the Harvard campus. By Daderot, in the public domain, encyclopedia.design.

In Europe, two key commissions were the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France, housing a vast collection of contemporary art; and coincident with Franco's death, the Miró Museum in Barcelona, home to Joan Miró's works. Both consist of sculptural white masonry integrated with the natural topography and landscape, and galleries lit by natural light—illustrious evocations of Sert's hallmark Mediterranean style.

The Barcelona museum Fundació Joan Miró embodies the geometric forms and integration with nature of modernist design. encyclopedia.design.

So…how did Sert, Jackson and Associates' modernism and mastery benefit Roosevelt Island? As lead architect for Eastwood and Westview, Sert dug deeply into his repertoire. Beyond rational apartment layouts that still hold up 50 years later, light was critical. Windows were made large, in some cases even floor-to-ceiling. U-shaped buildings provided for large courtyards where greenery could entertain the eye and the spirit. And socializing was encouraged by community rooms inside the buildings and pleasant seating outside. Eastwood, in particular, originally boasted stadium-like seating in one of its courtyards and still has tempting benches under its arcade.

In 1980, Sert won the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects, the highest award the professional organization gives to any architect. In addition to a prodigious output, Sert actually changed modernism. While the elder modernists who preceded him rightly prioritized functionalism, his unique contribution was to fuse it with aesthetics and humanism. He was a soft-spoken visionary who proved that architecture can transform lives and communities.

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Coffee Could Complain That We Take It for Granted

We brew it at home, we drink it at work, we socialize over a cup, or stop in at a café for its energy boost—never once reflecting on how the popularization of coffee literally changed the world.

It all began some six centuries ago in Ethiopia, where coffee plants grew wild. In the 1400s it was discovered that the seeds of the coffee plant could be roasted and ground to yield a robust beverage with an unexpected effect. Much like us, Arab Sufi monks drank coffee to stay awake and aid in concentration…not to study for exams, but to achieve divine consciousness during midnight prayers. No matter the goal, when Somali traders stumbled upon this miraculous brew, they were quick to appreciate its value. And thus began the commerce that would soon spread coffee around the globe.

Coffee arabica grew wild in parts of Africa. en.wikipedia.org.

A Social Outlet and Leveler

Coffee houses first sprang up in Cairo, then Aleppo (Syria) and, by the mid-1500s, in Constantinople in Ottoman Turkey. There were no such places as taverns in that part of the world because Muslims did not drink alcohol. So the coffee house filled a gaping void—it provided a "public sphere" where men could gather to socialize and discuss religion, politics, business and news (or gossip) away from the watchful eye of religious and state authorities. In fact, coffee houses soon became centers of public life, not just for the elite, but for a broader socioeconomic mix—a baby step, one might say, toward democratization. That is not to suggest, however, that coffee and coffee houses weren't controversial.

On the heels of the beverage's explosive popularity, conservative imams in various locations, including in all-important Mecca, sought to ban coffee. A *fatwa*, or religious decree, was issued declaring coffee *haram*, or forbidden. Taxes were imposed on its consumption and many coffee houses were forced to close. In some places, coffeehouses and warehouses containing coffee beans were sacked. This attitude most likely arose from the idea that, like alcohol and hashish, coffee had an effect on cognition. But early practitioners of Islamic medicine and science fought against this notion; instead they argued the benefits of the drink, which, they said, would stimulate the mind while defending against the appeal of those other harmful substances. They were aided in their efforts by vigorous protests staged by pro-coffee mobs—all of which eventually occasioned a reversal of the *fatwa* and a reopening of the community gathering places.

Inevitably, coffee spread along existing trade routes, in some instances even forging new ones. Coffee arrived in Italy in the late 1500s through Mediterranean pathways, while Central and Eastern Europeans learned of it from the Ottomans. By the 1600s, coffee and coffee house culture had reached Western Europe. People everywhere were enthralled.

Fueling the Enlightenment… and Slavery

On the one hand, cafés in Western Europe became hubs of intellectual ferment and debate. In Germany, Johann Sebastian Bach conducted musical ensembles at a local café and famously composed that paean to coffee, the "Coffee Cantata." In England, eminent physicians discussed the medicinal benefits of coffee, while the more business-

minded planted the seeds for such commercial innovations as the London Stock Exchange, Lloyd's of London and the East India Company. In Vienna, world-famous personalities such as Gustav Klimt, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce and Egon Schiele met there to argue and exchange ideas. While in America, Boston's Green Dragon Tavern and Coffeehouse achieved fame as the place where the Sons of Liberty gathered to plan the 1773 Boston Tea Party and to develop the seditious ideas that led to the American Revolution. (It is said that, after the Boston Tea Party, a majority of Americans began drinking coffee because drinking tea was seen as unpatriotic.)

On the other hand, some of coffee's effects were not unmixed blessings. In the 1600s, a Dutch merchant somehow obtained a number of coffee bushes from Yemen, even though they were very closely guarded. He transplanted them in Amsterdam's Botanical Garden, where they thrived, expanding over many decades into a healthy and productive coffee patch. The colonial powers among the European nations got the message; they realized they didn't have to import coffee beans from foreign lands; they could grow their own product using peasant and slave labor in their far-flung colonies.

France was seemingly the first New World cultivator. Seedlings brought to Martinique in 1720 yielded a phenomenal 18,680 coffee trees, which then allowed coffee growing to extend onto the French-held Caribbean island of Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Not far behind were the Dutch, English, Spanish and Portuguese. They also added coffee plantations to their cotton, tobacco and sugar holdings, transforming Indonesia, the Caribbean and Latin America into gulags of coffee cultivation. In the late 1700s, Saint-Domingue grew two-thirds of the world's coffee…until conditions drove the populace to burn the island's plantations and massacre their owners during the Haitian Revolution of 1791. Importing even more slave labor than before and supplanting huge tracts of forest, the Portuguese were determined to make Brazil the world's largest coffee producer, which it has been and continues to be since 1852. Coffee became the central element of the country's economy, banking system, politics and social structure, thus suppressing any impulse toward slave emancipation. Not surprisingly, it wasn't until 1888 that Brazil abolished slavery, the last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so.

Coffee culture in Vienna: coffee, glass of water, newspaper and marble tabletop. en.wikipedia.org.

Image of a colonial plantation. en.wikipedia.org.

Coffee, Industry and War

As the Industrial Revolution gained momentum in 18th century England, the demands of factory work were unrelenting. Not only was the work numbingly monotonous, factory schedules abandoned natural sleep-wake cycles to encompass round-the-clock shifts. Enter coffee, whose stimulant effect boosted energy and

heightened focus. Frequent coffee breaks enabled workers to remain alert and engaged regardless of the time of day. Coffee also replaced beer as the beverage of choice for many workers, leading to a more sober and attentive workforce. When industry spread to the rest of Europe and North America, owners took note and productivity soared.

Even our two world wars had a coffee component. George C.L. Washington's invention of instant coffee, made with fast-dissolving crystals, eliminated the lengthy brewing process of regular coffee. Thus the government saw an opportunity to give combat rations a boost. By lighting a little oil heater, GIs could take comfort and energy from their "cup of George" (WWI parlance) or "cup of Joe" (WWII) despite the hellfire going on around them. So popular was the instant brew, the Army ordered 140,000 bags of coffee beans a month the year we entered WWII, ten times the previous year's order. For a while, officials even rationed coffee for civilians so troops would have enough. After the war, companies like Nescafé and Maxwell House turned instant coffee into a household must.

Image: Café Aviva.

Nevertheless, yet again, coffee had its dark side. In Latin America, from the 1950s through the 1980s, it was linked to bloody civil wars. Widespread exploitation of laborers who tended and harvested coffee beans (as well as bananas and other global commodities) resulted in crushing rural poverty. When this spurred regional movements of communist activism, America —fearful of Soviet influence in our backyard and also mindful of corporate financial interests—intervened.

In Guatemala, we helped topple democratically elected, pro-peasant reformist Jácobo Arbenz Guzmán and helped install a right-wing president who canceled agrarian reform and restored the previous police state. In El Salvador, as a military junta fought leftist rebels trying to replace the country's coffee-oligarch-backed government, the U.S. contributed to the carnage by training right-wing death squads. In both countries, as well as in neighboring Nicaragua, coffee-instigated strife led to years, if not decades, of repression and bloody violence.

Return of the Coffee House

Inexplicably, coffee houses largely disappeared in America over most of the 20th century. We were probably unaware of what we had lost until legions of American tourists experienced the charm of Europe's cafés and expressed their chagrin. One of these tourists was Howard Schulz. Traveling to Italy, he fell in love with the ubiquitous cafés and espresso bars and their wonderful variety of coffee concoctions. Returning to Seattle, he convinced the owners of Starbucks, then the preeminent coffee bean roaster, to let him open an espresso bar. The rest, as they say, is history. He bought the company in 1987, and by 2020 owned almost 9,000 stores outright, had licensed the rights to another 6,500 outlets in the U.S., and generated some 30,000 stores internationally. And that's not even counting the thousands of imitators.

Coffee culture is back! We can sip a dazzling variety of brews while working on our computers, socializing with friends or just staring off into space. On Roosevelt Island we are doubly blessed. Yes, we have a Starbucks! And now we also have the recently launched Café Aviva. Enjoy!

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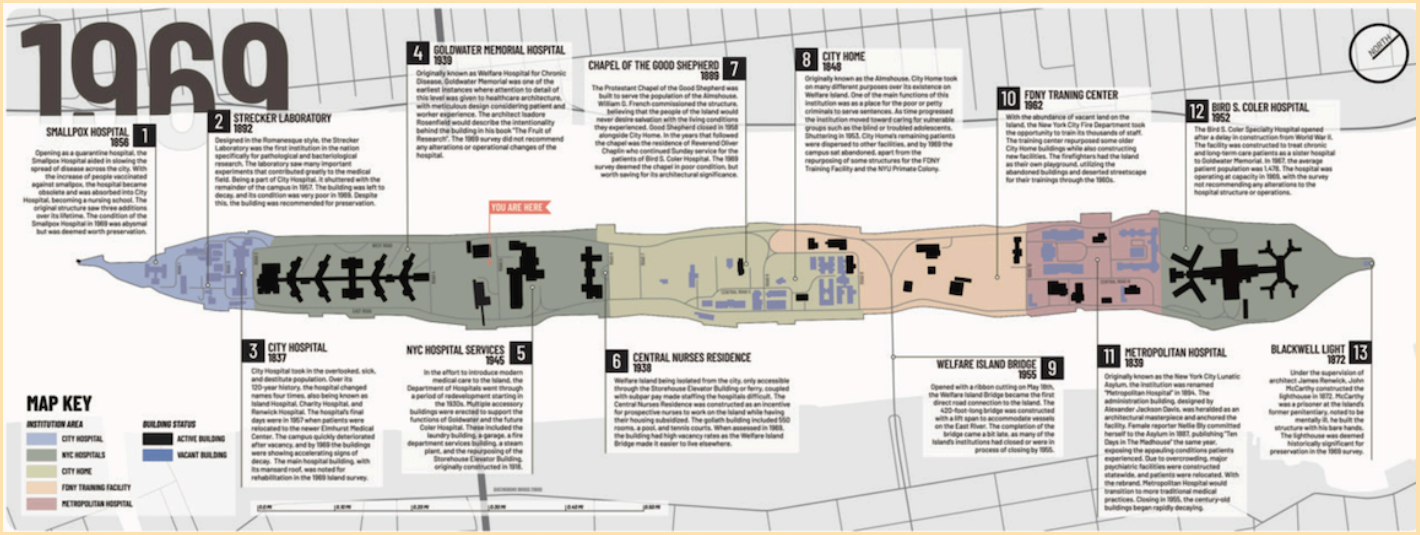
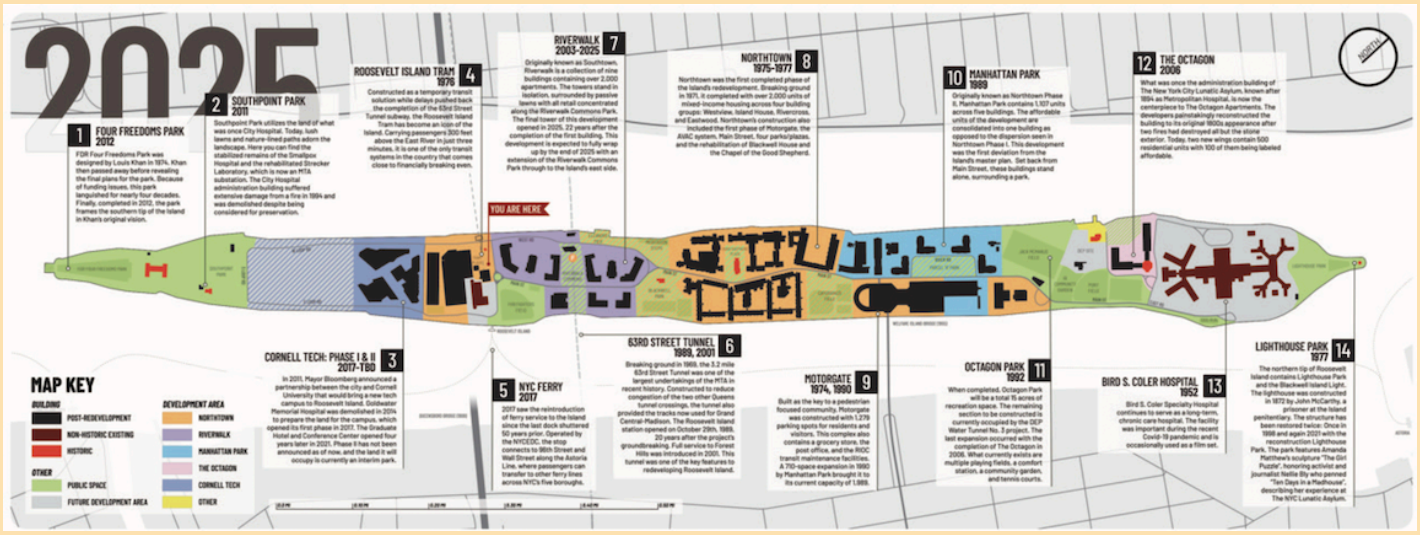
Not to Be Missed!

Coming soon this month outside the Visitors Center: The Roosevelt Island Historical Society, in collaboration with cartographer Dylan Brown and sponsor RIOC, presents a newly created, never-seen-before map display comparing the Roosevelt Island of 1969 and that of 2025. In addition, there will be photographs and text describing each structure and feature contained on the maps.

Dylan Brown, creator of the maps and exhibit, is a graduate student at Hunter College pursuing a Master of Science in Urban Planning. His fascination with the complex history of Roosevelt Island led to a long-term academic research project on the redevelopment of Welfare Island into our home and a formal internship with RIHS.





Keepin' Cool Before AC

We've had our share of 90°, 90°+ and even 100° temperatures this summer. Combined with the high humidity for which New York City (especially Manhattan) is known, discomfort levels climbed through the roof.

Of course we could take refuge in air conditioning. Even if electricity supply was occasionally cut back, the resulting indoor air might not have been as chilly as we wanted, but it was certainly tolerable. It's moments like these that have us wondering: What did people do before air conditioning?

They wore "cool" clothing: Today, except for outerwear, much of our clothing is interchangeable winter or summer. And if certain synthetic fabrics don't "breathe," so what! But in earlier times, people wore lightweight, light-colored and loose-fitting garments usually made of cotton or linen. Both these fabrics have a loose weave and thus allow for better air circulation (breathing) that helps heat from being trapped against the skin. They also absorb moisture, drawing sweat away from the body and allowing it to evaporate (that is, wicking it away). Of the two materials, however, linen is the reigning champ. The flax fibers used to make linen are hollow and rigid so that the fabric hangs away from the body. This creates more space for air flow and faster evaporation compared to cotton, which can cling to the skin when damp.

They used hand-held fans: These have been around literally for thousands of years. Whether a leafy frond, silk or newspaper, they can produce a cooling breeze (as well as shoo away annoying insects). Through most of the 19the century, fans were a status symbol for those who could afford them. Then, in the late 1800s, they became mass-produced and inexpensive. In fact, folded paper and paddle fans often advertised commercial goods and services and were given away free. The more modern incarnation seen in the city are hand-held, battery-operated fans.

They moved much of daily living outdoors: Before modern stoves, cooking required fire, which only added to the stultifying heat indoors. Homes that had sufficient acreage usually featured a "summer kitchen," a small, separate cook-shed located away from the house. (Perhaps this was also the origin of the outdoor grill.) If food had to be cooked indoors, it was usually done early in the morning and after the worst heat had subsided after sunset.

Porches were major instruments for combating heat. Not only did they shield the downstairs rooms of the house from sun, they offered a shaded, cooler space in which to relax. In really bad heat, beds or cots could be moved out there or to specially constructed second-story porches for sleeping. President William Howard Taft, in the early 20th century, spent his summer nights outdoors in a "sleeping porch," a stand-alone, screened-in room on top of the White House.

Escaping to the fire escape. History Time Machine.

Poorer city folk had their counterpart strategies. They might spend most of their day in a wooded park or on the stoop of their building (probably with a fan in hand). And at night it was very common to drag mattresses to the roof of the building or onto the fire escape.

They installed windows: Glass was extremely expensive in the early days of our country, so any construction kept their

number and size to a minimum. Once manufacturing techniques improved and prices decreased, they were used more liberally in order to generate a breeze. The double-hung window was designed for this very purpose. Raising the bottom sash and lowering the top sash stimulated a small air current that pushed built-up indoor heat out the top of the window. The taller the window, the more air flow was created. And windows on opposite walls of a home created a cross-breeze that passed through and cooled the interior space. Thus the attractiveness of "cross-ventilation" emphasized in New York City apartment ads decades ago. In consistently hot regions, louvered shutters could be closed to block the sun, while still allowing air to flow.

Another technique was to install transom windows above interior doorways. This brought fresh air to rooms that might not get any otherwise. Interior windows and air shafts were notably added retroactively, in accordance with a new 1901 law, to older tenement buildings in New York City.

Frosting the air pre- AC. apartmenttherapy.com.

They incorporated other design stratagems when building homes: Siting a home properly, that is, positioning it so that existing trees might block the sun and prevailing winds could cause a cross-breeze, was key. Plantings around houses also kept them cooler. In New York State, the specifications for one-room school houses included a ring of deciduous trees surrounding the structure. Denuded in winter, the trees allowed the sun to warm the school, while leafed-out in the warmer months, they provided cooling shade.

For those who could afford it, other cooling adaptations were possible. Higher ceilings—ten feet or more—made indoor spaces feel more airy. In addition, an open center stair hall, especially one capped with a windowed cupola, took advantage of a natural ventilation process known as the "chimney effect": warm, less dense air rises and escapes through higher openings, while cooler, denser air enters through lower openings, creating a continuous air flow. Installing retractable canvas awnings also worked.

Finally, fans evolved beyond the hand-held type. Even as far back as the late 18th century, homeowners could install a chair fan attached to the back and operated by a foot pedal, or later, a rocking chair fan powered by the movement of the rocking chair itself. In 1886, the first electric fan was invented. But since most homes did not have electricity, that same year saw the invention of the Hunter Fan Company's water-powered, belt-driven ceiling fan. A year later, an engineer at the Singer Manufacturing Company attached propeller blades to an electric-sewing-machine motor and mounted it on the ceiling. In the 1910s, there were wind-up table fans that could run for about 30 minutes and table fans powered by kerosene, alcohol or gas. Ultimately electric fans emerged. A well-known trick among the non-affluent was to run a fan over a block of ice, producing an effect similar to air conditioning. At the same time, affluent homeowners were insisting on large, powerful fans built into the attic to create a forceful air flow that drew heat out of the house.

They left the city: We still do that, of course. But the summer exodus originated as a climate strategy. Historically, it began with privileged families who fled to the mountains or coast to avoid the sweltering heat. By the 1920s, middle- and working-classes were availing themselves of small country or beach cabins, bungalows and A-frames. And once the automobile became widely available, the flight to cooler climes included

Theater marquee graphics beckoned the uncomfortable. aurorasginjoint.com.

car camping, motor courts and lodges and, eventually, before residential AC, air-conditioned motels.

They went to the movies: In 1922, the Carrier Engineering Corporation installed modern air conditioning systems in the Metropolitan Theater in Los Angeles and the Rivoli Theater in New York. Not long afterwards, theaters across the country followed suit, transforming what had been windowless, oppressively hot spaces in hot weather into attractive places to escape the heat. For decades before residential AC became commonplace, theater marquees ballyhooed "climate controlled" interiors with graphics and even sculptural replicas of snow, snowmen and icicles. Who could resist a "frosty" Saturday afternoon during one of New York's intolerably muggy heat waves?

A version of this article by Elizabeth Yuko appeared at https://www.history.com/articles/11-ways-people-beat-the-heat-before-air-conditioning. An additional source: https://www.outbacklinen.co/blogs/news/linen-vs-cotton-for-summer

ROOSEVELT ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY EST. 1976

RIHS Calendar—Celebrating Roosevelt Island at 50

Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE @ the New York Public Library Branch, 504 Main St. No registration required.

Monday, September 29, 2025, 6:30 pm
What Is the Island All About: Multigenerational Families

Monday, October 20, 2025, 6:30 pm
The People and Organizations that Make a Community

Monday, November 17, 2025, 6:30 pm
Government on the Island

Monday, December 15, 6:30 pm
Possible alternate date: January 12
Rallying for the Good: Community Stories