

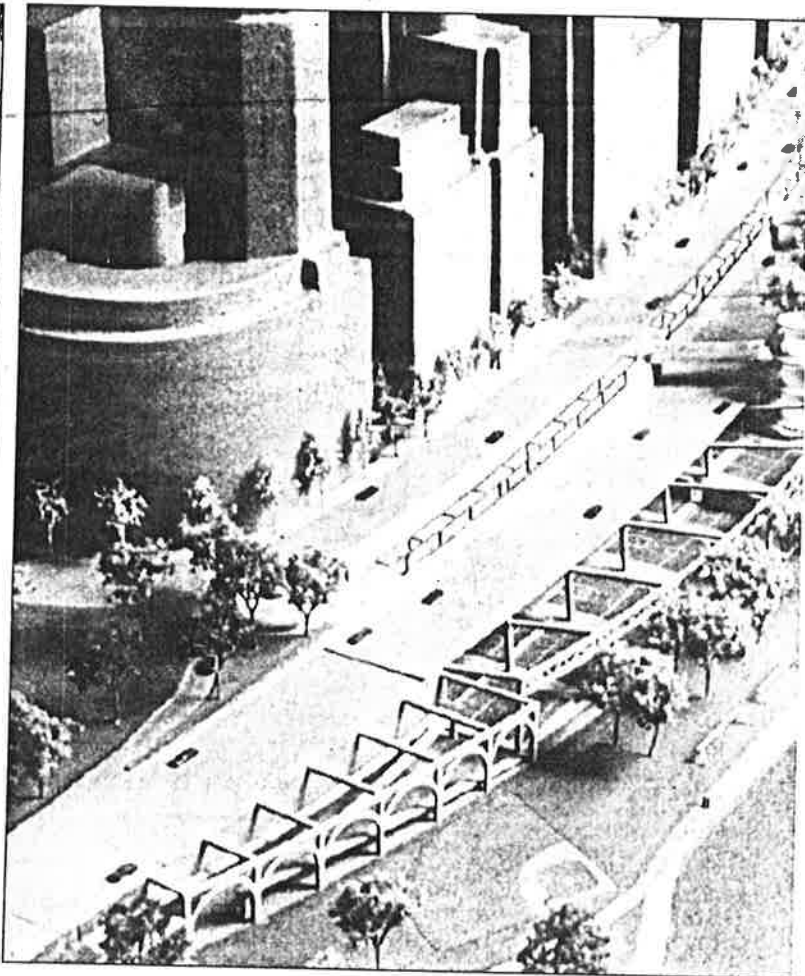
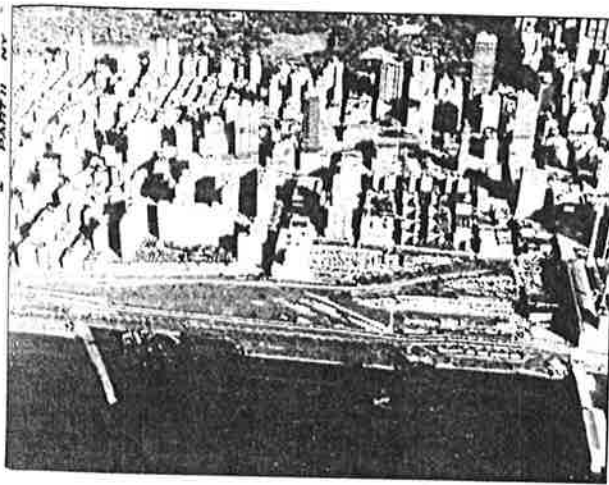


PART II

A Vision Of Green

Four artists
dream up Riverside Park
South, the future/fantasy
of Manhattan's
West Side.

Pages 54-55



**New York's first official dreamers
— whose planned NYC park may
never get built — had to 'design
beyond their time.'**

Poetry and

By Amei Wallach
STAFF WRITER

AT A moment when dreams for this city are as far-fetched as schools that don't need metal detectors or survival for La Mama, four artists have been given license to dream on official time.

Riverside Drive South Corp. — an unlikely consortium of environmental, artistic and neighborhood groups and the developer they have most consistently loved to hate, Donald Trump — has hired the artists Mary Miss, Mel Chin, Joyce Kozloff and Fred Wilson to envision a future for a blighted stretch of railroad tracks, rusting overpasses and degenerating piers not far from Lincoln Center.

The usual public spaces scenario, at least in this city, is for artists to be brought in after-the-fact to glamorize other people's mistakes. This time, Riverside South took the hint from places like Seattle, and the artists have been working from the very first concept stages, with landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh and the architect Paul Willen for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, to make the best of the last large open space left in New York.

Their 22-acre park "for all New Yorkers" wants to welcome the city's rich gumbo of ethnic groups and incomes. As shown in plans submitted to the City Planning Commission earlier this month, Riverside Park South would stretch from 59th to 72nd Streets, where it would join jigsaw fashion with the old Riverside Park, in an unbroken greensward connecting Mid-

town with Harlem. It would have a 1,200-seat amphitheater, ball fields, racketball courts, swings for all ages, sidewalk clowns and cafes, flowering trees, fresh water ponds, meandering walks, loafing lawns, vegetable patches and an unheard-of luxury for Manhattan Island: places where people can stroll down to the river's edge — and beyond, onto a rehabilitated Pier 1, which thrusts 900 feet into the water at about 70th.

It would be a park, says Mel Chin, that "would expand this notion of park and interpret it for the next millenia. We really hope it will be forward-looking and have self-sustaining aspects: It will compost its own soil, treat its own sewage. It will have an ecological and sociological mission."

Richard Kahan, chairman of Riverside South, says the process for city permissions could be completed in the next seven or eight months, ready for ground breaking on the first part of the park. He's got a track record to weight his words: as chairman of the New York State Urban Development Corp., he got Roosevelt Island built, and then he turned the Battery Park City development into a high-tech, high-taste riverside playground.

But before Riverside South Park can happen, part of the West Side Highway will have to be torn down and rerouted with state and federal funds, a complex of 8.3 million square feet of residential and 1.8 million square feet of film and television studios will have to be built to pay for the public spaces, Donald Trump — or some other public or private developer — will have to invent some new ways of raising money, and a whole lot of neighborhood and city groups will have to have their sometimes belligerent, often contradictory say.

But even if the barely possible gets demoted to a pipedream, Chin, Miss, Kozloff, Wilson and their en-

vironmentally-sound, politically-correct, user-friendly, neighborhood-creating park have opened up a quixotic note of optimism, a perversely high-minded patch of water-blue and grass-green in the low-visibility gloom that blankets '90s New York.

The point, says Chin, is not necessarily whether or not the park will be built, the point is "to think about poetic and pragmatic aspects of a park."

"We really wanted it to be something so compelling to people they simply have a new experience they never had before," says Miss.

Each of the artists brought to the project the concerns that are at the center of their art. Chin's installations ask questions about exploitation and ecology. The National Endowment for the Arts gave him the official stamp of disapproval by denying a grant for a project that employed plants as "toxic sponges" to resurrect a toxic waste dump — an experiment Chin will carry out with official Netherlands blessings outside Amsterdam next month.

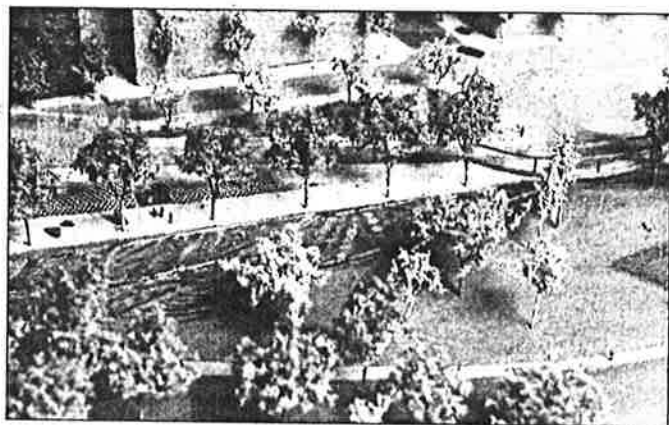
Miss, who fashions nature into sculpture and sculpture into park settings, is best known here for her Battery Park City South Cove, which collaborates with the river's edge to create so ingeniously romantic a setting that it has become a downtown version of Lovers' Lane.

Kozloff, who has spent the past decade bringing the visual riches of her colored tiles to urban disaster areas like railroad stations, likes to express the cultural and ethnic history of a site. Wilson's art critiques both racism and how museums determine quality.

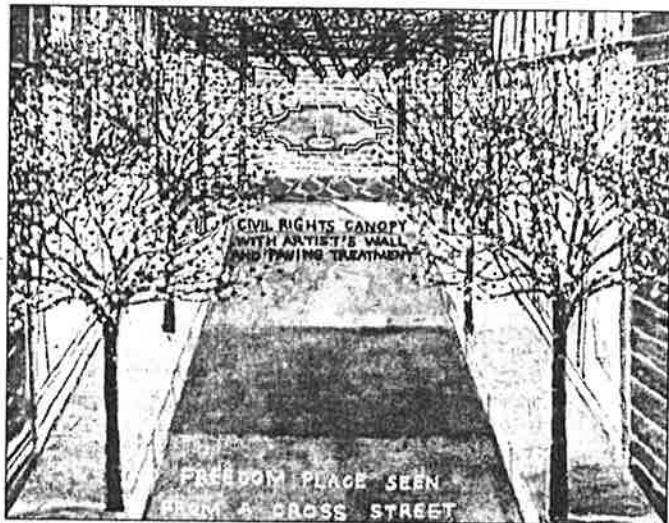
You can't assign who did what to this plan — "it's not about signature styles," says Kozloff. But you can see how it all works together to express concerns for clean water, clean air, for ways in which the past can



An aerial view of Riverside South, far left, and Michael Van Valkenburgh's model of Riverside South Park, left, the 22-acre park that would stretch from 59th to 72nd Streets



Joyce Kozloff's watercolor of Freedom Place, right, depicts the stretch from 59th to 70th Streets that would be a visual time line that chronicles the struggles of African-Americans and ends in a minipark with a garden, shown in Michael Van Valkenburgh's model, above right.



Pragmatism

connect to the future and industry can cooperate with ecology. In their plans, the river's edge in Riverside South is treated in a number of innovative ways, including planting it with goldenrod and marsh pink and letting it slope naturally.

The old piers and pilings, symbols of an industrial past, will be either rehabilitated or carved to increase the water flow, and to spell out the Seneca Indian symbol for "to hold hands," which will intermittently be submerged in high tide or clearly visible in low.

The artist team is virtually a cliché of multiculturalism — Fred Wilson is African-American, Mel Chin is Chinese American, Joyce Kozloff is an activist Jew, and Mary Miss might be mistaken for a WASP. "But Mel brought the collard greens to dinner meetings," they joke. "Fred brought the lox."

This is over breakfast in the rear of Eclair Bakery on 72nd Street the day before Spring, as snow melts off down coats and jackets. Kahan and these four disparate, opinionated protagonists are demonstrating how it was they could all work together in the same room.

"As artists, we're really interested in our ideas not being diluted," says Wilson — the only one of the four who lets people finish before jumping in with his own say. "Somehow people have the idea if you dilute something, you'll cover every base, and exactly the opposite happens."

"If it gets watered down, it serves no one in the end," says Chin.

One of the strongest — and therefore the most endangered ideas, particularly if other ethnic groups want to have their stories told, too — is the Freedom Place concept, which would visually tell the story of the black struggle in this country.

Freedom Place took its theme from a "monument"

already in place to three martyrs, killed while registering black voters in Mississippi in 1964. Actually, the monument is now little more than a plaque, buried in the ground in a turn-around behind Lincoln Towers — whose residents stand to lose their river-views if Riverside South ever gets built.

Wilson told the group that blacks aren't altogether comfortable with the way the media has lionized the Mississippi three, while ignoring black deaths, because two of the three were white. "History's not like that," he says. "A lot of things lead up to those events." So the Freedom Place idea has been expanded in the plan:



Newsday / Ari Mintz

Richard Kahan, head of Riverside Drive South Corp.

Instead of a place stretching four blocks — from 70th to 66th — it would stretch all the way down to 59th Street, in a visual time line that chronicles the struggles of African-Americans since the 17th Century and ends in a minipark, Freedom Place South, with trees and gardens reminiscent of the agrarian past.

"I want it to be as powerful as the Vietnam War Memorial," says Kozloff. Freedom Place would in many ways be the gateway to the park from the city-side, through the new streets to be built through the new buildings that developers would raise. All the new streets would lead right into the park, with color coded bricks or sidewalks to let people know where they are headed.

Small theater groups and arts organizations would be housed on those streets. There would be cafes, shops, constant performances and activities, the artists explain as they make the endless rounds of planning board meetings and community groups describing their plan.

Often they are met with hostility by residents who say the 72nd Street subway system is chaotic enough, sewage a disaster, that they are only stalking horses for a developer who will use them to get city approval, then mostly scrap the park for business as usual.

"It's much safer back there in the studio," says Miss.

"I've had a lot of moral ambiguity," says Kozloff. "I've been at community meetings with my son, who is a young radical, and there'd be a lot of people yelling, and he'd say, 'Shouldn't we be on the other side?'"

"None of us think we can change the world," says Miss. "But our hope is to give people the idea there's some alternative to what they're used to. There's a new way to think about possibilities." / III