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## In the Region

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### Westchester

## New Life for Rundown Site on Yonkers Waterfront



Photographs by Suzy Allman for The New York Times

A view of the Hudson River from the Yonkers Public Library in the Larkin Center, also the home of the city's Board of Education.

A former factory becomes a library and school board offices.

By ELSA BRENNER

**T**he \$53 million Larkin Center the new home of the Yonkers Public Library and the city's Board of Education — opened late last month, offering hope for the long-awaited rebirth of this city's downtown waterfront.

The imposing concrete and glass structure on the site of the former Otis Elevator headquarters looks out on a formerly decaying industrial neighborhood, a 4.5 mile strip along the river, that these days is in a state of busy activity.

The 200,000-square-foot, four-story building — its first two stories are double height — is the first of a number of new waterfront buildings to be completed here.



These projects include the \$35 million renovation of the Metro-North Station across River Street from Larkin Center; it is scheduled to be finished next fall. A \$10 million six-story municipal parking garage for 600 cars is nearing completion a block away. A \$60 million, 266-apartment complex called Hudson Park, being built by Collins Enterprises of Stamford, Conn., next to the waterfront, is scheduled to be finished next summer. And work on the \$13

million Esplanade Park, a 1.5-mile-long public promenade along the shoreline, has already been completed.

For more than 40 years, city leaders have proffered grand plans for revitalizing the waterfront, but until recently few projects actually moved ahead. In 1987, a proposed 1,850-unit condominium project fell victim to a construction moratorium imposed in connection with a federal housing desegregation order. A year later,



the city converted a power plant into a 136-unit condo called the Scrimshaw House. Although it is now fully occupied, Scrimshaw House was slow to fill up and stood alone on the desolate waterfront until last fall, when construction along the river began in earnest.

Considered a linchpin to the downtown's revitalization, Larkin Center is the city's largest investment in the waterfront district. The Yorkers Industrial Development Agency purchased the building from the city with \$800,000 raised by selling revenue bonds. The city had purchased it from the Port Authority of New York, which bought it from Otis in the early 1980's and occupied until the late 1990's. The Industrial Development Agency then retained the Manhattan-based National Development Council — a nonprofit organization that provides financial consulting to municipalities and other nonprofits — to manage the project.

From that point on, financing and construction were overseen by the National Development Council's Housing and Economic Development Corporation — which has built, among other things, 4,000 units of below-market-rate housing for various communities, residential buildings for the University of Washington in Seattle and parking garages in Syracuse. In Westchester, the council is building housing for a \$6 million 'artists' community in Peekskill.

Daniel Marsh III, president of the Housing and Economic Development Corporation, said the Yorkers project involved gutting, refacing and expanding by 40,000 square feet the original 160,000-square-foot, 77-year-old building, which Otis Elevator had occupied until 1983. (Elisha Otis began manufacturing elevators in Yorkers a few years after the railroad came to the city in 1849, spurring its development as an industrial center. Otis Elevator is now a subsidiary of the United Technologies Corporation, based in Hartford, and no longer has a presence in Yorkers.)

The first order of business when construction began two years ago was ridding the abandoned interior of the building of asbestos and a thick coating of bacteria-laden pigeon droppings — “a particularly terrible combination,” Mr. Marsh said.

Edward A. Sheeran, a special assistant to Mayor John D. Spencer, said: “The building at that point was horrible to look at, but

we all closed our eyes and visualized what it could be. We realized it had so much potential.”

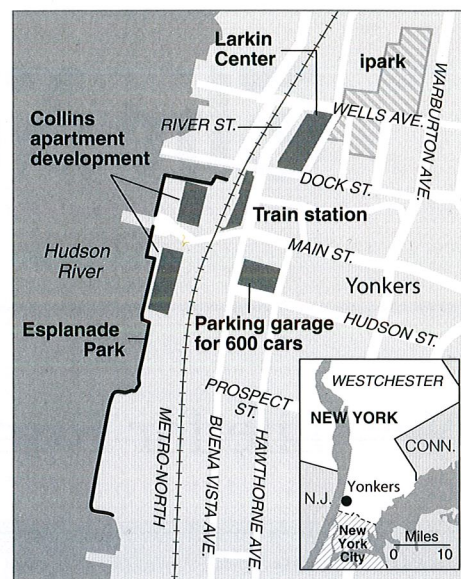
By the time the cleanup had been finished, only the frame, the floors and the roof of the older red building were retained. On the back side of the building, the original brick facade can still be seen.

The National Development Council and the city commissioned Highland Associates of Clarks Summit, Pa., to be the architects for the project, providing them with a number of design objectives. Joseph G. Rominski, the project designer, said, “Our charge was to give the new building a strong civic presence and at the same time have it blend in to the existing context and character of the downtown waterfront.” He noted that besides the industrial sites nearby, a Federal-style United States Post Office is to the south of the new Larkin Center.

The proximity of the Hudson River also influenced both the exterior and interior design. Outside, for energy conservation — in particular as a shield against the harshest rays of the afternoon sun over the river — Larkin Center's massive glass windows are tinted blue, in sharp contrast to its white concrete walls.

The plans for the interior evolved over two years in meetings held two and three times a month, said Stephen E. Force, director of the Yorkers Public Library. Most of the rooms — including a number of public meeting rooms and the children's and teens' sections — look out over the river and the Palisades on its west bank. Also in the new children's sections, the architecture incorporates images and shapes related to navigation, like sailboats and lighthouses. Since the city demolished its former Carnegie Library in 1982, the branch serving this neighborhood had been housed in temporary quarters, a former department store called Genung's, where the children's room was in the windowless basement.

With 1,800 library visitors expected daily, materials — like the carpet tiles on the floors — were chosen to withstand heavy use. Other materials include granite and stonelike porcelain tile in the public lobbies, wood veneers with contrasting tones on end panels and service desks and limestone panels on many interior walls, said Ronda Beemer, another architect on the project.



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Meanwhile, in response to the new construction, some of the buildings in an existing 700,000-square-foot industrial park next to Larkin Center have been upgraded. In particular, Joseph Cotter, president of Hudson View Associates, which owns ipark as it is called, said his company had recently spent \$10 million to upgrade another Otis Elevator complex dating back to 1892.

The streetscapes in the industrial park, whose tenants include Kawasaki Rail Car and an extension of Mercy College, were also changed to blend with the street designs around the new construction. “The library has added a whole element of dynamism to the neighborhood,” said Mr. Cotter, whose company also owns a 1.5-million-square-foot industrial park in Lake Success on Long Island.

The council is leasing 97,500 square feet of office space in Larkin Center to the Board of Education and 75,000 square feet to the public library. The remaining space — the main entrance, a 43-foot-high atrium and a 464-seat auditorium — will be used for a number of public and private purposes, including municipal functions and receptions. The floor of the entrance welcomes visitors with an elaborate design of the city's seal rendered in granite and tile.

At the ribbon cutting on Sept. 18, Gov. George E. Pataki described Larkin Center as “magnificent transformation of an abandoned industrial building” and said it had sent a signal that Yorkers's waterfront was finally being reborn.