

# BRONX ECOLOGY

BLUEPRINT FOR A  
NEW ENVIRONMENTALISM



Allen Hershkowitz

Foreword and Original Designs by  
Maya Lin

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NEW ENVIRONMENTALISM

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## FOREWORD

When Allen Hershkowitz first approached me in 1993 to become involved in a project that would bring a large-scale paper-recycling plant to an abandoned industrial site just outside Manhattan in the South Bronx, I was only too glad to be involved, not solely from my interests as a designer but also from my concerns as an environmentalist.

His idea that recycling paper should be brought nearer to the source was groundbreaking. We would no longer mine virgin forests for paper mills in rural America, but harvest the urban forests that modern times have created, in cities where we generate more than enough wastepaper to take the place of our virgin forests. It was a precedent-setting dream that connected an environmental group, NRDC, with a community-action group, Banana Kelly, with government and unions and numerous paper companies throughout an almost eight-year process during which the Bronx Community Paper Company, the BCPC, took shape. The journey the BCPC took, from an abandoned rail yard in the South Bronx to paper mills from Maine to Sweden—where Allen and I and a few other courageous and hopeful souls traveled to learn, and to teach—is the story told here.

Allen always had faith that good design needed to be a strong part of the equation. I attempted to create a design that would showcase the recycling process—educate visitors about the importance of recycling, create a sense of community for the workers at the plant, and create a building that would give a sense of identity to the project. But I also felt I had a responsibility to not jeopardize the project with additional design costs.

Even if design were not a factor, the plant would mean so much to the community and to the environment.

The BCPC was an idea that perhaps was ahead of its time—at least in this country, where, sadly, the price of milk is higher than that of gasoline and it is cheaper to sprawl out in rural America than rebuild parts of our inner-city landscapes. But it was important to put forth the idea as a possibility: an idea that *should* happen. While we worked on this project, sky-high returns on technology stocks seemed like such a sure bet that no one was even considering investments in something like a real factory, regardless of the social and environmental vision behind it. And the politics of New York City at the time made certain the BCPC couldn't overcome that. It certainly wasn't for lack of effort.

Sometimes, as tools for us to learn from, ideas on paper are as important as physical structures. When the Municipal Art Society produced its 1997 show *Designing Industrial Ecology: The Bronx Community Paper Company* in its main gallery at Rockefeller Center during Christmastime, it was both to present the project and to educate people on what was possible.

We came surprisingly close to realizing a project that would have been an amazing collaboration between environmentalists, community, industry, and design. The idea that Allen put forth and that this book chronicles has been—and remains—of interest to numerous countries, city officials, designers, and international agencies across the world—in Europe, in Asia, and in dozens of cities throughout the United States. To me, we built an idea, one so fully formed that I look forward to when it can give fruit. This book is a guide for that time.

MAYA LIN

New York City, 2002

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Thanks especially also to my NRDC co-workers and trustees Sarah Chasis, Tom Cochran, Bill DeWind, Mark Izeman, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Maya Lin, Joel Reynolds, Jonathan F. P. Rose, Larry Rockefeller, Jacob Scherr, Greg Wetstone, and Fritz Schwarz.

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(BCPC) project, compassionately implement its development, and sort through the many complex issues that arose almost every day we worked on it.

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## *Introduction*

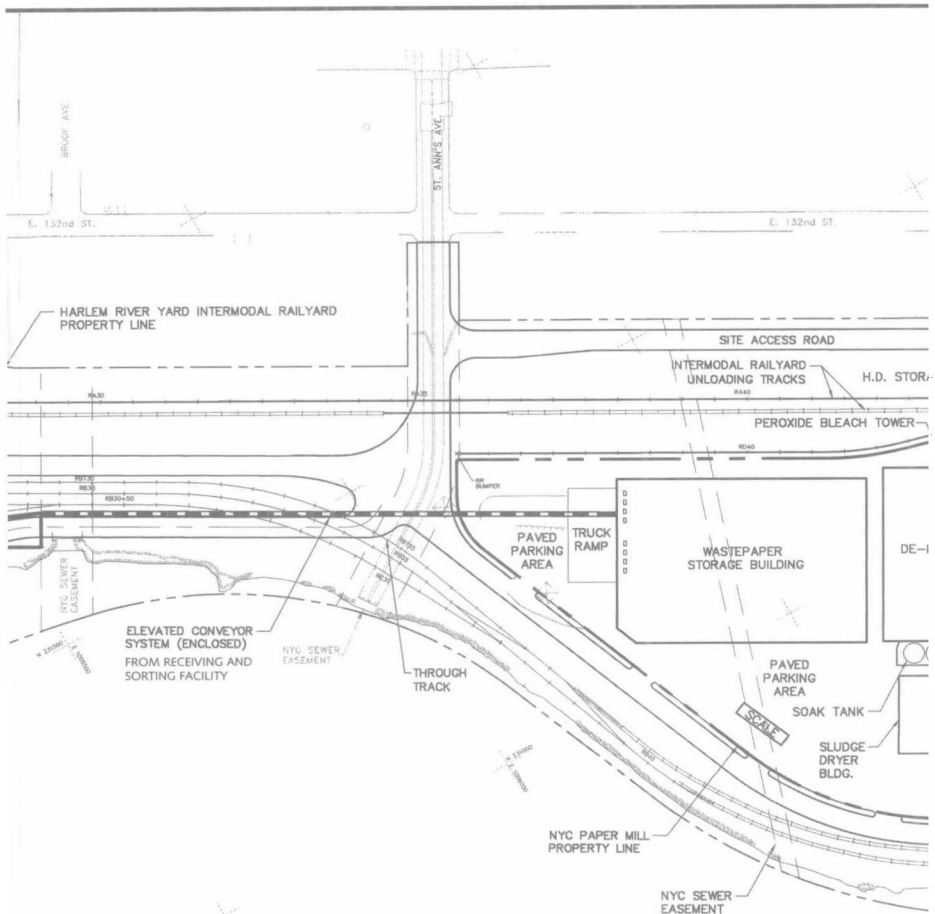
### The Hopes behind the Bronx Community Paper Company

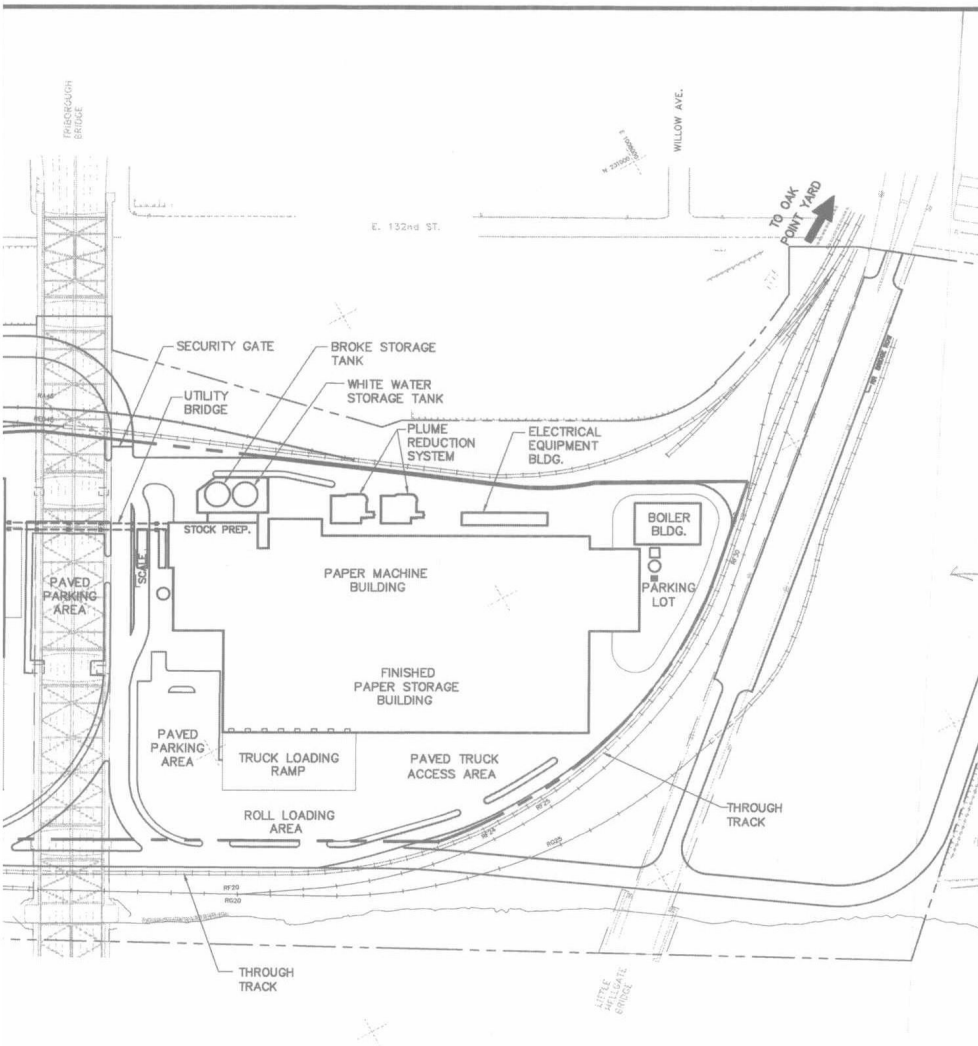
I tackled one job after the other for which I was not  
qualified. I had a self-confidence that was scandalous.

I didn't appreciate all the possible dangers  
and things that could go wrong.

—Ernst Mayr

IN 1992 I DECIDED to develop a world-scale recycled-paper mill in New York City at an abandoned rail yard—a brownfield, as former industrial sites are known—in the city's poorest zip code, in the South Bronx. It was a project designed to marry environmental remediation and economic development. Although I initially intended the project to be large enough to have a meaningful ecological and market impact, the project's scale and complexity grew well beyond anything I had originally imagined. At an anticipated cost that would ultimately have exceeded \$500 million, its facilities were to include an integrated recycled-paper mill, a wastepaper de-inking plant, a newsprint paper-making machine, a wastepaper sorting plant, and a steam boiler. (See mill site plan on pages 2 and 3.) If it had been completed, the Bronx Community Paper Company (BCPC) project would have helped remedy many environmental problems—described later in this text—and produced 2,200 jobs during construction (for 22 months) and more than 400 full-time, permanent jobs. Just before the project met an untimely





**DRAFT**

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demise, it was recognized by President Bill Clinton—and throughout the industrialized and developing world by many other politicians, environmentalists, developers, and cultural observers—as a model for future development. Even America's most prominent critic of recycling, *New York Times* columnist John Tierney, wrote that my "dream of building a mill in the Bronx for recycled newsprint was nothing if not appealing. It evoked a certain admiration even from his [my] professional enemies, a group I [John Tierney] joined in 1996 by writing an article for the *New York Times Magazine* titled 'Recycling Is Garbage.'"<sup>1</sup>

I wasn't a visionary. I was just committed to getting something done. I had been involved in professional environmental-advocacy work since 1982, specializing for most of that time on issues related to solid-waste management, recycling, sustainable development, medical wastes, industrial ecology, and sludge management. As a member of the Natural Resources Defense Council's (NRDC's) senior staff since 1989, I had worked to promote recycling and reduce landfilling domestically, and I had also worked alongside environmentalists from around the world to prevent first-world nations from dumping hazardous wastes into less developed countries. To someone like myself, unschooled in the challenges and intricacies of industrial development—indeed, unschooled in any type of development—building a recycled-paper mill in New York City seemed like not only a feasible but a reasonable thing to do.

Wastepaper was—and remains—among New York City's top three exports. Of the approximately 36,000 tons of commercial and residential waste discarded in the city each day, a whopping 12,600 tons of it is paper.<sup>2</sup> The city is nothing less than a Saudi Arabia of wastepaper. Its annual production of cellulose (the raw material used to manufacture paper) is remarkable, equaling anywhere from between one half to the total amount of virgin cellulose in the entire Brazilian rain forest, a tropical forest that is by itself almost as large as the entire continental United States.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the New York City metropolitan area hosts the world's strongest urban market for finished-paper products, serving some of the world's busiest law firms, the world's largest securities industry, and a huge publishing market that includes the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post*, *El Diario*, the *Village Voice*, and hundreds of local, regional, and trade presses. The 1.5 million

tons of newsprint consumed in the New York City metropolitan area each year is by itself more than the 1.2 million tons consumed annually by all of Canada. The New York City area alone consumes nearly 12 percent of the entire United States newsprint market, which annually uses 12.7 million tons of newsprint.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, I couldn't understand why paper companies weren't clamoring to develop an in-city recycled-paper mill to take advantage of this plentiful supply of environmentally superior raw materials.

I was also moved to build a recycled-paper mill because of the decline in manufacturing jobs in New York City. Between 1995 and 2000, during the greatest economic boom in the city's history—and one of the greatest economic expansions in United States' history—manufacturing jobs actually declined by 11.8 percent.<sup>5</sup> Although broadening employment opportunities and alleviating poverty are generally not the focus of environmental groups, they are essential attributes of a truly sustainable society. As Mohammed Valli Moosa, minister of environmental affairs and tourism in South Africa, has remarked: "The single most important threat to sustainable development globally is poverty and the widening gap between the rich and the desperately poor. This is not only a threat to poor nations but also to wealthy nations, as the instability, conflict, disease and environmental degradation associated with poverty threaten the overall status of our planet."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, current international business trends are working in exactly the opposite direction. According to Joseph E. Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, "Globalization has distorted the allocation of resources . . . [B]asic, and even obvious, principles often seem contradicted. One might have thought that money would flow from rich countries to the poor countries; but year after year, exactly the opposite occurs. One might have thought that the rich countries, being far more capable of bearing the risks of volatility in interest rates and exchange rates, would largely bear those risks when they lend money to the poor nations. Yet the poor are left to bear the burdens."<sup>7</sup>

At the time I was working to develop the recycled-paper mill in the Bronx, unemployment in New York City consistently exceeded 6 percent, averaging more than 2 percent above the national rate. In the South Bronx community hosting the mill, the single poorest 1990 census tract in the city, unemployment hovered at the incredibly high 20 percent level.



(Since the early 1990s the citywide rate has continued to climb, and as of this writing it is 7.6 percent, 8.8 percent in the Bronx.)<sup>8</sup> This impoverishment makes it difficult for families to keep their children well nourished, safe, and properly clothed, and difficult for them to prevent or repair environmental hazards in and around their homes—making them more susceptible to public-health risks. And in New York City, as in Boston, Chicago, Denver, Kansas City, and other cities where manufacturing jobs have been declining, homelessness remains at record levels. Between 1997 and 2001—precisely the time the Bronx mill was originally intended to begin producing hundreds of permanent jobs—homelessness increased 50 percent in New York City.<sup>9</sup>

My initial vision for the mill was simple and seemed logical: It should remedy economic and environmental problems, not merely be “less bad” than other mills. The mill would take some of the enormous amount of newspapers and magazines New Yorkers throw away each day and manufacture new newsprint from it. Environmental problems in New York City were already serious, and although developing a recycling mill that added fewer burdens might have been an improvement over building a paper mill that used virgin resources, that would not have been accomplishment enough. My aim was to ecologically and economically improve the location where the mill would be sited. However, in pursuing the BCPC, I was also pursuing a larger set of goals, one informed by several decades of frustrated efforts to rectify industrial and social ills by more traditional means.

## THE SEEDS OF DISCONTENT

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, I directed NRDC’s solid waste management project.<sup>10</sup> The job involved research and congressional, legislative, and regulatory lobbying, often in coalition with representatives of cities, counties, states, and other environmentalists. Among the legislative and regulatory initiatives we fought to enact were those designed to encourage consumer-products companies to reduce the potentially toxic, nonrecyclable waste designed into the products and packaging you and I purchase every day. One way we attempted to do this was by promoting legislation and regulations that would stimulate