

# Rikers Island Prison Known as 'Monstrosity,'

NY Times

By PAUL L. MONTGOMERY

In its 41 years of forbidding existence, first as the Rikers Island Penitentiary and now as the Adolescent Remand Shelter, the ugly red-brick building has been called "God-forsaken," a "Monstrosity," and "a latter-day Devil's Island."

Since 1968, when the old-style prison was "temporarily" given over to boys 16 to 20 years old awaiting trial or sentencing, the building's eight blocks of steel and concrete cells have seethed with tension and despair.

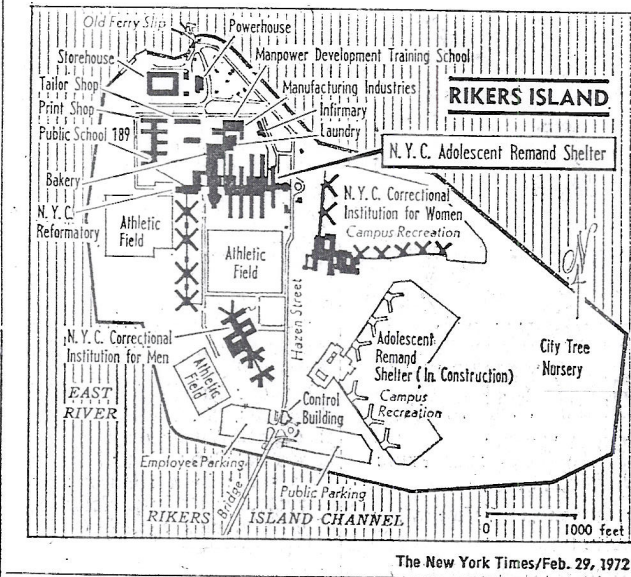
There have been frequent outbreaks, including the one Sunday afternoon in which 75 inmates and 20 guards were injured. Last year, four inmates of the remand shelter hanged themselves. In the last two years, two correction officers have been indicted for selling heroin to their teen-aged prisoners. On the average, it has probably been the most overcrowded of all the overcrowded city detention facilities.

### 'Most Difficult Prison'

"I have always said that it was the most difficult prison going," William J. vanden Heuvel, chairman of the Board of Correction, said yesterday. "The system there brutalizes both the guards and the guarded."

Detention of adolescents awaiting trial (the number has skyrocketed in the last 15 years) has always been the stepchild of the Correction Department.

Through the years, the young prisoners have been shunted from one outmoded facility to another. The city has never had a prison designed with the special educational and recreational needs of adolescents in mind,



The New York Times/Feb. 29, 1972

and delays in building one have been enormous.

In 1963, for example, Anna M. Kross, who was then Commissioner of Correction, warned that there would be "major disturbances" if adolescent facilities were not immediately expanded. "With all due respect, Commissioner, has—te makes' waste," replied Meyer F. Wiles, the acting Commissioner of Public Works.

### Island's ,Oldest Building

Until the early nineteen-sixties, adolescents were kept with adults in the borough houses of detention. Then the present Brooklyn House of Detention, built as a traditional jail with no classroom space, no outdoor recreation area and only a tiny gymnasium, was used for adolescents. In 1968, when conditions in Brooklyn came under fierce criticism, the adolescents were transferred to the vacated penitentiary, the oldest building on Rikers Island.

The department's hope for

the future is the new remand shelter on the island, which has been under construction since April, 1969. The \$45-million facility, with a capacity of 1,080, most of it in single-occupancy cells, has long been planned.

In August, 1970, a Lindsay administration spokesman said it would be completed in February, 1972. Yesterday, a Lindsay administration spokesman said "present budget calculations have it scheduled to open by July 1 at the latest."

Yesterday the present remand shelter had 1,929 inmates, which, correction officials said, is 99 per cent of capacity. However, the city detention population runs in yearly cycles, with lows in January and February and highs in September. In the late summer, the shelter operates at about 130 per cent of capacity.

Many of the inmates are narcotics addicts, some being held because they could not

raise \$50 or \$100 bail. The average stay in the shelter is four months.

Critics have said that recreational, educational and counseling facilities are minimal. There is a school, an annex of P.S. 189, but its capacity is 180. In the winter, inmates usually get one hour of exercise a week in the gymnasium.

### Nothing for inmates to Do

Most of the inmates' time is spent being shuttled to and from court, and lounging in the corridors of their cell tiers with nothing to do.

"They're just storing you away, like," said one former inmate. "You have nothing to look forward to, nothing to learn. Your mind is dormant, you don't grow at all, all you talk about is what you did or didn't do."

Prof. Joel Walker of the New York University Graduate School of Social Work, who has worked frequently on Rikers Island, said that moving the remand shelter into new quarters would not solve its problems.

"You would have to retrain the officers to remove the repressive orientation that has grown up there," he said. The professor said that overcrowding and the transient nature of the population had compounded the shelter's difficulties.

The former inmate, now active in the Fortune Society, was asked what reforms he would institute if he were the warden of the shelter.

"I'd let them all go," he replied. "They'd be better off in the streets than just sitting around being educated in crime."