



# The Dawn of the Hamptons House

By ELIZABETH PARKING

Where in heaven (or hell) did the McMansion come from? The Star talks to Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic for *The New Yorker*.

In *The New York Times Magazine's* 1990 examination of real estate development on the South Fork of Long Island, "The Hamptons: The Strangling of a Resort," the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic Paul Goldberger sounded a grim warning about laissez-faire development which threatened to annihilate the pristine beaches and the pastoral landscape which has drawn people to the region since the 17th century. Twenty-four years later Mr. Goldberger's observations, which sounded alarm at the time, seem amazingly prescient, and practical.

A few days ago Mr. Goldberger took a drive through the potato fields south of the highway, revisiting his article of nearly a quarter century ago. He spoke frankly about new "traditional" Shingle Style houses, modern residential architecture, successful preservation initiatives, and future developments along Montauk Highway.

"The prognosis remains the same: Not so hot. The conundrum of the real destiny that we come here for," Mr. Goldberger said, as he and a reporter drove past a new subdivision on Halsey Lane in Bridgehampton. "Those of us who are here all the time don't see it."

Granted, even when they're right, he's not usually popular. But Mr. Goldberger has become a kind of institution, valued for his sharp insight and plain speaking. Last year he was honored by Guild Hall with a lifetime achievement award, in recognition of a writing career that began some 33 years ago at *The New York Times* and has continued, for the last 10 years, at *The New Yorker*. (The other honorees in this year's gala will be John Chamberlain, Mercedes Riechl, and Roy Fuqua. They join more than 200 arts residents who have previously been honored for their contributions to the arts by Guild Hall.)

Mr. Goldberger is not only a journalist, but also the author of six books, including a *New York Times* readable book for 2005, "Up From Ground Zero: Politics, Architecture, and the Rebuilding of New York." He is a professor at the New School and the former dean of the Parsons School of Design.

His jargon-free criticism has inadvertently ostracized the pseudos that arise when artistic vision intersects with bureaucratic oversight, such as the construction at Grand Zee and the struggle between development and preservation on the East End. He makes his points through example and compelling narrative, showing rather than just telling. "As a writer on architecture," he said, "I'm also a teacher, sharing my enthusiasms."

Mr. Goldberger and his wife, Susan Schlosser, and their two children, began spending weekends in East Hampton in the early 1980s. His observations of the community were the genesis of "The Hamptons: The Strangling of a Resort." In that memorable article he described Bridgehampton farmland being "miced every piece by piece, for housing lots." Condominiums, he wrote, were "sprawling in Southampton meadows."

Especially, the breakneck pace of residential development in the '80s could not continue. The commodity of open land is finite, of course, and it was even then observed



Ocean Avenue, East Hampton, L.I.

The Schuyler Quakerboard house on Lee Avenue, top, is an early-20th-century postcard, a prototype of the popular mega-cottage style. Above, Ocean Avenue, once looked as raw and bare as some of today's new developments. Courtesy of the East Hampton Library, Long Island Collection

to be rapidly disappearing. According to Mr. Goldberger's article, between May and the middle of August the Town of East Hampton received 145 applications for residential subdivisions or new commercial construction. In 2006, between May and the end of August, the Town of East Hampton received only six residential-subdivision or new commercial-construction applications.

The good news, Mr. Goldberger said as he drove the back road, is that East Hampton, Sagaponack, and the surrounding communities don't self-destruct. They are still beautiful, with unspoiled beaches and leafy country roads, and the area attracts more people than ever. But prices have increased, in many cases, by 1,000 percent. Mr. Goldberger wrote in 1993 that an acre of land in Bridgehampton or Sagaponack with perhaps \$7,000 to \$10,000 in 1960 could bring \$40,000 as a building site by 1970, and in 1993 could probably have been sold for upward of \$120,000. Today real estate listings show that a similar acre of land south of the highway in Bridgehampton is priced at more than \$1.3 million.

In his afternoon guided tour, as Mr. Goldberger passed one side of the hills — and lows — of the local architecture, it became clear that his incisive observations continue to offer a narrative of the area's changes. While cruising down Ocean Road in Bridgehampton, he remarked on the names of nearby streets: Paul's Lane, Daniel's Lane, Matthew's Lane, and even Jack and Jill Lane. They're all "named after the builder's children," he pointed.

An older subdivision, off Paul's Lane, with houses surrounded by abundant green space, has taken on the comfortable patina of age. The architectural contemporary houses that seemed jarring to Mr. Goldberger when they were first constructed in the 1970s now elicit an almost nostalgic appreciation.

"This is not bad here," he said, gazing out across properties bordered by weathered split rail fences. "There are a lot of trees and very good landscaping. There's still a lot of open land. You have a sense of being in a somewhat place. But each day it gets less real."

Looking south at the intersection of Paul's Lane and Halsey Lane, Mr. Goldberger pointed to the tightly clustered, denser new construction — a sign of how development remains grips even as the amount of buildable land dwindles.

A little farther west, Halsey Lane again intersects Paul's Lane, continuing south till it meets the Meigs Bay Dairy. Here, two more rural establishments remain: Swan Creek Farm and a farm belonging to Nivia R. Tipping. But the northern boundary of the mall is crowded with dense new construction, houses built one in front of the other, and check-by-pow, to maximize the number that can be built on a limited amount of road footage. Builders' signs and For Sale signs proliferate. These houses here are lined with rednecks, their prices ranging from \$3,000 million to \$125 million.

"These new houses are in a way more damning than the modern houses were in the '70s and '80s," Mr. Goldberger said. "They're so much bigger, and they occupy so much more of the lot. These are houses on steroids. They are pushing at each other. In retrospect the modern houses were simpler and seemed more understated. The new Shingle Style postcards in relation to the architectural traditions of the area, but it's completely disingenuous. Completely fake. They are big, plunked down one after another with an absence of absolutely any kind of decent landscaping. He passed, then added, "Levinson-by-the-Sea."

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## Paul Goldberger

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The recent trend toward so-called "traditional" houses — the meat and potatoes of current residential construction — emerged as a backlash against the spare, boxy modern style of the '60s and '70s, that by the '80s was being perceived as jarring.

"There's a certain type now, that years ago looked like it was going to be much more in accord with the nature of the place — a revival of the Shingle Style," Mr. Goldberger said, shaking his head at a bunch of spec houses on Halsey Lane. "But it's become a plague. There's a zillion of them. And because the average size of the houses is so large, they seem to be taking over."

Shingle Style revival houses are derivative of the late-19th-century architecture found in the summer cottages along Lily Pond Lane and Lee Avenue in East Hampton. The large houses there were built on open pasture and ran down to the dunes. The lush landscaping that today has bound the houses to the land didn't exist then. Mr. Goldberger said the cottages almost certainly "looked odd to the old fishing and farming villagers of East Hampton." And when new, those old houses probably stood out in the landscape much as the new construction in Sagaponack does today. "It's important to remember not to give all this new stuff a free pass," he said, "but to put it in some historical perspective."

The Schuyler Quackenbush house, at the corner of Lee and Ocean Avenues in East Hampton, is, Mr. Goldberger said, "probably the most imitated house in all of the Hamptons." Designed by Cyrus Eidlitz and completed at the turn of the century, it is a quintessential example of an original Shingle Style house set back from the road behind a split-rail fence. The house features a gambrel roof, eyebrow windows, multiple chimneys, and a wrap-around porch.

While imitation has been called the most sincere form of flattery, endless repetition doesn't necessarily improve on the original, according to Mr. Goldberger. The new houses built in the style of the Quackenbush house have taken on a dreary sameness. "It's sad," he said. "Anything, when infinitely repeated begins to look cheap and like a parody."

### Building Blocks

Cruising around in the car, Mr. Goldberger also talked a bit about his own history and evolution as a critic. His opinions are often formed during the process of writing.

"There's a story about James Reston," he said, referring to the New York Times writer and columnist. "He's said to have been asked about his opinion on an important event of the day. And he said, 'I don't know. How can I know? I haven't written about it.' Writing is how writers focus their thoughts."

Mr. Goldberger grew up in Nutley, N.J. His father worked at Scholastic and his mother was a teacher. Their house was filled with books. "Writing, reading, and verbal things were what they were about," he said. "My mother was a very good teacher, and my father was a very good editor. I was interested in architecture from a very young age. I played with blocks."

Mr. Goldberger started writing for The Nutley Sun when he was in high



"These are houses on steroids," Mr. Goldberger said of densely clustered new construction along Halsey Lane in Bridgehampton.



Paul Goldberger

school and continued through his years as a student of art and architectural history at Yale. "I loved writing and I loved architecture," he said. "But I didn't have a great passion to be an architect. I actually express myself more naturally through words than design. I didn't know that I'd be all that good as an architect and there's no question that the world has enough second-rate architects."

Mr. Goldberger wrote his first piece for The New York Times while he was still an undergraduate. "I sold The New York Times Magazine a piece about a white vigilante militant leader organizing the Newark area after the 1960s riots," he recalled. "I was assigned to cover the story for The Sun. It was so interesting. I thought it would be a good piece for the Times Magazine." He added, "It was an amazing bit of chutzpah for an 18-year-old."

After graduation he began working at The New York Times. "I was a very low assistant-assistant editor," he said. "Mainly I read the slush pile of manuscripts. I found that very boring, so I started doing my own writing. I worked on freelance architecture pieces because it interested

me. I could sell them and I built up a portfolio."

At 34, Mr. Goldberger won a Pulitzer Prize for his architectural criticism. "The New York Times used to nominate a great number of people and took it very seriously," he said. "In those days it was a relatively low-key thing. I don't remember that I knew I was nominated. I heard it from someone I knew from college, he called to say I had made it to the finals and that he thought I might win. It was a complete surprise. It was wonderful. They released the list of winners at noon on a Monday, and word spread quickly, and my phone started ringing."

### Long Time Passing

Despite the ever-present menace of encroaching bad design, "in the end," Mr. Goldberger said, "the amazing thing about here is that, for all we complain endlessly, it's still better than other places. And while it's been hugely compromised from what it was, it's still incredible."

There are several neighborhoods and houses that he particularly admires. The triangle around the Sagaponack/ver-

tery geo high marks for its enduring rural character. "It could be out of 'Our Town.' It's just wonderful. It's held out."

He also admires unabashedly modern construction, such as the unconventional plans hinted at by the concrete wall that will soon be the Macklowe house, just east of the Rensselaer mansion on Daniel's Lane in Sagaponack, and a small modern house nearby that was designed by Todd Williams. "The explosion of Shingle Style stuff makes me much more sympathetic" to less traditionally designed houses, he said. "It's refreshing to see someone doing something modern."

In front of the chapel in Wainscott Mr. Goldberger looked out across the enormous expanse of meadow, down to Wainscott Pond, and finally to the Atlantic Ocean. The panorama is sparsely developed, and though houses dot the periphery of the pond, the view is rural. "Wainscott center remains beautiful because of Ronald Lauder," he said. "He bought up all the land, essentially everything he could see. The free market or a civic group is not responsible for what you see here." (Mr. Lauder is an heir to the Estee Lauder cosmetic business.)

But not all communities are lucky enough to have wealthy civic-minded patrons. A few miles away, about a half mile east of East Hampton Town Hall, almost in Mr. Goldberger's own backyard, the latest battle against urban sprawl is shaping up. The Franklin Triangle shopping complex has submitted an application to the Town of East Hampton for permission to modernize and expand.

Mr. Goldberger concedes that the existing group of shops is "an incoherent splatter" that has "grown without any planning." But, in his opinion, the new project would make the situation worse. "What's proposed is a large complex with 80 parking spaces," he said. "The town wants entrance and egress out the back, on Skinshampton Road. The logic is screwed up. If there's too much traffic on the highway to accommodate, it shouldn't be here. Not, 'Why don't we dump all the traffic on a residential street behind it?' If you start with a premise to accommodate the developers' desire to build projects bigger than wanted or needed — you have to question that premise."

Morgan McGovern