

Water margin

Always dreamed of a seaside bolt hole? Join the club. Tom Dyckhoff visits the Hamptons, America's ultimate beach resort, where it's dog-eat-dog for a place in the sun

Tom Dyckhoff

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The 20-year-long Hamptons party ended somewhat abruptly outside the Conscience Point nightclub one warm July evening last year, when Lizzie Grubman was asked by a bouncer to move her car. Grubman, the New York power PR par excellence, didn't want to move it so, in a fit of pique, she drove her Merc into the queue of nightclubbers, screaming, "Fuck you, white trash" at the bouncer, before scarping. (All allegedly, of course - there's a rather expensive lawsuit pending.) Sixteen people were injured. It was a bit of a party pooper.

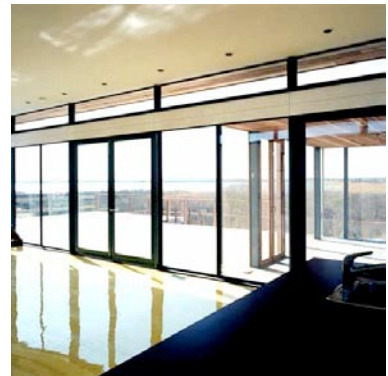
The Grubman incident entered American folklore as a defining moment in the decadence of elite America before September 11 and Enron. And there was nowhere more elite and decadent than the Hamptons. This 20-mile strip of beach resorts at the tip of Long Island has been rich New Yorkers' weekend escape from sweltering city summers for 100 years.

In the 1980s, though, its decadence ballooned. By the late 1990s, gossip columns chronicled a

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nonstop, contact-swapping orgy for modern-day Gatsbys like Grubman. Those wealthy Manhattanites that lacked a private jet would suffer four-hour Friday night traffic on Highway 27, trading in their Manolos for a summer let for \$500,000 a season, and weekends trying to rub shoulders with P Diddy and Jerry Seinfeld.

Not any more. In happier times, today would mark the start of the weekend to be at the Hamptons, a last chance to catch the beaches and parties before Labor Day next weekend. But in post-Enron USA, decadence isn't quite the thing. The weekendening Wall Street and Sex And The City crowds have stayed away, beaches and clubs are quieter, summer lets cheaper, and property prices have, at best, plateaued. The Hamptons, for now, are over.



Bad news for gossip columnists but great news for locals such as Alastair Gordon, long-time Hamptons resident and chronicler. "It's not as flash here this season," he says. "People are getting the message that you don't need 20 bedrooms and staff just to go away for the weekend."

The resort's social decadence had its design equivalent in what Gordon calls "architectural Viagra". As Wall Street soared in the 1980s and 1990s, every inch of F Scott Fitzgerald's "fresh green breast of the New World" - spotted with simple shingle cottages and fishing villages - was smothered in vast weekender mansions. "These people were so rich they just wanted to get rid of money," says Gordon, "and they weren't too fussy how. My neighbour made \$40m one day, and just went out and spent it on more bedrooms."

Taste round here is a tricky business. These Gordon Gekko-like arrivistes were desperate for homes that yelled "I've made it!" in gold domes with knobs on. But they also wanted to pass off as "old money", aping the discreet, traditional estates of the Vanderbilts and Astors. The result? Pneumatic Palladian mansions with bulging porticoes, artificially aged by rubbing yoghurt on to shingle tiles (encourages moss, apparently) and weaving ivy on to facades, like hair extensions. But all in vain. You could never mistake these upstarts for the real thing.

That's the trouble with paradise: everyone wants a piece, and before you know it, the very qualities that attracted you - the space, light, big skies and beaches that first drew visitors here in the late 19th century - have been replaced by high fences and armed response signs in every driveaway.

Still, just as the local backlash against flash, weekending Gekkos and Grubmans gathered pace (check out www.nukethehamptons.com), so residents like Alastair Gordon began campaigning against indiscriminate development. You'd call it snobbery, if the offenders weren't so unappealing. But this is not simple Nimbyism - even though that, Gordon concedes, is an art form round here ("When you move in, neighbours don't visit with a cup of sugar, they take you to court"). It's about protecting heritage dating back to the Hamptons' two heydays, when money magically coincided with taste - the pre-Depression, Great Gatsby era and the postwar period, when the resorts were a beachside bohemia for artists such as Jackson Pollock, leaving them with one of America's finest collections of modernist architecture. Indeed, it was the demolition of artist Robert Motherwell's home for a nouveau-trad horror that first prompted Gordon to take action.

But there's been a more positive backlash these past two years. In the cracks left between the bulging mansions, older residents have been investing in those old-style Hamptons qualities - space, nature and silence - with shockingly beautiful, low-budget designs that reflect its modern beach-shack heritage.

Helene Winer's house, for instance, has been designed to screen out her more aesthetically challenged neighbours, and to defend her patch of quiet space. Winer, owner of the influential Metro Pictures gallery, in New York's modish Chelsea, bought her small beach shack behind the dunes at Bridgehampton in 1993. "At the time, no one else was near; a few houses dotted up and down the road, that's all." Not for long. This was the 1990s housing boom and slowly, the McMansions muscled in. "They're not the kind of houses you exactly want to stare at," she says. "I didn't want them looking in on me either."

Fred Stelle from Stelle Architects didn't resort to that Hamptons speciality, high fences. "We were cleverer than that!" he says. "It was pretty informal to build, which was great, because we could almost build it from the inside out. We'd stand in the living room, say, and position windows and walls to block out the neighbours, but make the most of the sky, and the building's relationship with the beach. One looming house even went up as we were building, but it was fine. We just adapted." It's true. Stand inside the redesigned and extended house, and you might indeed be alone on the waterfront, with just the reeds and dunes for company.

Its stark, plain modern lines and bold colours refer to the style of the postwar beach shacks. Yet its use of traditional "shingle" cedar wood - red, weathering to silver - means it crouches naturally in the reeds. This sly balance of the contextual and contemporary has placed Stelle at the vanguard of the Hamptons' "modern" revival.

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It can do extravagant, too. Its latest home on Shelter Island, for investment bankers Bob and Sherry Wolfgang, has flash ingredients - the swimming pool and an eye-popping 180-degree view over north-shore Long Island, for example. But there are no pumped-up porticoes, just muted, minimal style.

Others have followed suit. Developer Coco Brown has unveiled plans for a series of startling modern homes in Sagaponack, each by a prestigious architect, among them Richard Rogers and Richard Meier. Meanwhile, architect Rafael Viñoly has just completed a breathtaking pavilion in the garden of his Southampton house. It's undeniably modern, with a geometric form and vast landscape windows framing the woods, yet, like the Winer house, it is elegantly crafted in maple and cedar wood to fit its context. It's where Viñoly goes to relax, think and play the piano.

Is it just a question of taste? Maybe. There's certainly been a recent trickle of what Alastair Gordon calls the "Wallpaper* crew", the latest of the Hamptons cliques - discerning young couples who sense that "modern" is the new standard for showing off wealth. Or it could be that slightly tighter wallets are sharpening the eye. But who cares about the reason: this new architecture is simply better.

Yet no one's rash enough to say the Hamptons have turned a corner. The history of the Hamptons, after all, is one of fickle, oscillating tastes. "Helene thinks her neighbours feel sorry for her," says Kate Evarts, "living in a stark house, while they live in these plush Soprano mafia mansions. But sometimes you just have to lead the way. I have a big rock star client now who wants a flashy home. I said, 'Woah there!' and talked him through how he could get what he wanted without the gold-taps look. You can't force people to eat their greens, but if you make them tasty enough, they'll eat them up eventually."