

Taking the A train to Queens: Housing alternatives for a new seaside community

Exhibitions

By Jayne Merkel

Arverne: Housing on the Edge, originated by the Architectural League of New York, Gallery of the Yale School of Art and Architecture Building, New Haven, Conn., February 11–March 8, 2002.

"Arverne-by-the-Sea" sounds idyllic—a New York City neighborhood with subway service to Manhattan and only blocks from a beautiful beach that runs all the way to the Hamptons.

Hoping to make this dream come true, leaders of the Architectural League of New York commissioned studies from four teams of designers just as the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) was issuing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the site, the largest developable tract of vacant land in the city.

In the 19th century, grand hotels and Shingle Style mansions lined Arverne's boardwalk. But fires and hurricanes in the first decades of the 20th century took their toll. By the 1930s, it had become an inexpensive resort with rows of simple beach bungalows. Then it declined further. After World War II, the New York City Housing Authority built high-rise housing projects there, and the area became predominantly poor. In 1965, Arverne was designated an urban-renewal area, and most of the old, low-rise houses were torn down.

Today, Arverne has the largest

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concentration of public housing in the city and is infamous for its vacant lots where packs of wild dogs roam. There are no grocery stores or job opportunities.

In December 2000, as the city advertised its RFP for "the development of market-rate housing and community and commercial facilities" on 100 acres of the 308-acre site, the League held a housing symposium and invited architects who had been studying housing in their academic studios and professional offices to develop schemes.

Alternatives to the norm

The League had hoped to present the theoretical studies before the city selected a development plan so it might inspire alternatives to the one- and two-family row houses that have become the norm in New York's outer boroughs. But the HPD felt it had to proceed, so the League opened its show this past winter at the same time the city awarded the project to the Benjamin Development Company and the Beechwood Organization, working with Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Kuhn Architects (EEK). The League's show was recently on view at Yale.

In putting together the exhibition, Rosalie Genevro, the League's executive director, selected architects with a variety of design approaches. The show certainly presented a range—from an economic analysis illustrated with

abstract geometric forms (developed by CASE, a new Dutch research foundation founded by architects) to an experiential scheme with vibrant, almost pulsating versions of buildings (from Michael Sorkin at City College). Team leaders did the

boxes that form a street wall, and Marble Fairbanks' row houses with curving "expanded roofscapes" clustered around courtyards.

The CASE team—including architects Bruce Fisher and Beth Margulis, along with John Bosch and Reinier de Graaf—produced a



Deamer + Phillips and a team from Yale focused on environmental issues.

work in their own offices, drawing on ideas they had been developing (in some cases for years) in books and in the classroom.

The Columbia University team—which included Michael Bell, Mark Rakatansky, Scott Marble, and Karen Fairbanks—proposed a variety of dwelling types to create transitions from the old bungalows and new row houses on the east side of the site to the high-rise slabs on the west. The designs ranged from Bell's glass-walled houses on stilts to Rakatansky's solid-walled, Modernist

kind of moonscape on the dunes. To encourage long-term economic development related to Kennedy airport, CASE concentrated its initial efforts on improvements in infrastructure. The plan would allow roads that no longer serve buildings to return to landscape, discouraging the growing tendency to build single-family suburban housing on the peninsula's existing urban grid. It would also build new "soft" roads along topographical lines, as the need arises, fostering clustered housing.

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Environmental challenges

The Yale team focused on infrastructure, too. Concerned about the environmental challenges posed by the fragile dune landscape, ocean storms, and decrepit streets and sewers, Diana Balmori, Deborah Berke, Peggy Deamer (of Deamer + Phillips), and Keller Easterling suggested creating a natural system with drainage swales; porous paving; and plants, bacteria, and sunlight that treat effluents, instead of rebuilding the “hard” drainage



Housing by the Columbia team.

that is there now. Their plans for boxy energy-efficient buildings in various densities and hybrid types call for modular construction to minimize cost and speed production.

Manufactured housing also plays a role in the scheme developed by the City College team, which emphasized the pleasures of the beach-front environment rather than the problems. Sorkin's master plan provides a broad, planted path leading from the existing elevated train station to the beach, a stretch of “Copacabana,” miniature wetlands, and “green-machine” technology that converts black water to gray.

Recalling earlier new towns

Other members of the City College team, which included architects

from SHoP and SYSTEMarchitects, devised a proposal for one sector of the site inspired by “the play between private and communal spaces” in the early-20th-century “new town” community of Sunnyside Gardens, in Queens, and Sea Ranch, in California. But they employed a 21st-century kit of building parts and stepped the houses down as they move closer to the beach.

Although not initially invited by the Architectural League, a team from Cooper Union and Pratt Institute—led by Diane Lewis and James Rossant—participated in the exhibition because it had been hired by community leaders in Arverne to devise a plan for stitching together a group of existing institutions with new educational and housing facilities. Called “Universe-City,” the plan envisions a campus incorporating the 80-year-old Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Public School 183, and the Hammel Houses public housing project, along with a new chapel, a planetarium, a library-math-science center, housing for the elderly, and a landscaped plaza.

The Architectural League exhibition in New York also showed the plans designed by EEK for the developers selected by the city. EEK's scheme envisions a Main Street connecting housing sites with the



SYSTEMarchitects from City College envisioned a techno-romantic town on the sea.

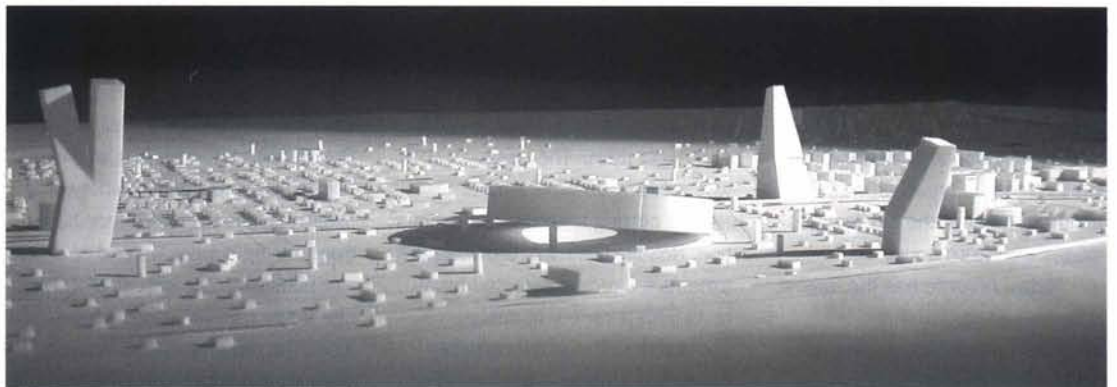
beach and subway station. Inspired by another successful early-20th-century Queens new town, Forest Hills, EEK designed a commercial core with apartments above stores and three distinct neighborhoods with 2,200 units of different housing types. Forest Hills is actually a better model than Sunnyside, despite the prominent role the latter played in early modern housing literature and the fact that Lewis Mumford lived there. This is because Sunnyside consists solely of housing, whereas Forest Hills is bordered by parks, linked by both the Long Island Railroad and the subway, and has a walkable downtown most American cities would die for. Construction should start on the first EEK houses this summer.

Using HUD funds

The New York City Housing Authority is also planning to pump \$225 million of federal money from the HOPE VI housing redevelopment program into

the Arverne area. Instead of using the money to tear down its high-rise housing projects (as many cities have done), New York will invest the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) money to connect existing public housing projects (the Arverne and Edgemere Houses) by pedestrian paths to parks, community centers, and a commercial strip designed to resemble the thriving one in Belle Harbor, a prosperous beachside neighborhood on the western end of the Rockaway peninsula.

Getting the right balance between innovation and time-tested ideas is never easy. If some of the faculty architects' schemes seem to come more from their own past work than conditions at the site itself (glass walls in a hurricane zone? pristine boxes in a green scheme?), they at least offer alternatives to the formulaic housing built in New York recently and to the much-touted but tired New Urbanist schemes. (continued on page 110)



The plan produced by CASE, a Dutch research group, depicts a kind of moonscape on the dunes.