Little Neck has been my home for the past 40 years. I moved here because I was told by a friend that it had the easiest and fastest commute into Manhattan. I rented an apartment on Little Neck Parkway and from there I walked daily to the LIRR station to begin my trek to downtown. Having previously commuted from Long Island’s south shore, this new quick commute seemed like a dream. Shortly after moving in, I married. Like me, my new wife easily adapted to the comforts of walking to the LIRR, to shops, and, of course, to the Scobee Diner. After three years in our apartment we had seen enough: Little Neck was going to be our home. We purchased a house in the nearby Westmoreland district where, over the next 36-plus years, we raised our two children and our German Shorthaired Pointers.

Perhaps you’d think that after 40 years of living in Little Neck I’d know almost everything about it. Yet all that I’ve seen is but a fraction of what really is here in this remote corner of New York City. So as a new DLNHS board member I have joined with our President, Pam Broderick, and other board members including architects Kevin Wolfe and Victor Dadras, to use my lifelong avocation, photography, to provide you, over the next few newsletters, with an expansive 2020 historical and architectural vision of Little Neck, New York.
A LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Hello there everyone—welcome back!

In this most challenging of times, the Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society is committed to keeping you engaged and informed about the history of our neighborhoods. We will be presenting new programming with socially distanced outdoor events, as well as virtual programs, starting this fall—planning is underway!

We hosted our very first Virtual Annual Meeting on June 20th featuring architectural historian Frampton Tolbert who spoke most eloquently about “Queens Modern” architecture, including some examples in our own Little Neck and Douglaston neighborhoods.

We are expecting to receive a Covid Relief Matching Grant Challenge from the William G. Pomeroy Foundation in partnership with the Museum Association of New York. This grant will help fund new outdoor and virtual programs so that participants can enjoy learning about the history and preservation of our Douglaston and Little Neck neighborhoods while staying safe and healthy.

We have some fun and exciting stories to share with you in this newsletter—so please take a look at “Transformations”, the story of the sensitive renovation of a 100 year old house in the Douglaston Hill Historic District; and “Making Masks”, about one Douglastonian’s Covid mask project that became “The Little Engine That Could.”

And finally, I hope you will enjoy a new and ongoing project that DLNHS has begun. Through photographs, we are documenting the architectural history of Little Neck, with board member and Little Neck resident Peter Reinharz. This feature will run in several print newsletters to come. Even Peter, who has been a resident for 40 years, saw his community with new eyes when he looked through the lens of his camera and marveled at Little Neck’s rich architectural past.

Check out his photos—and his story—that documents everything from the deserted streets of Little Neck early in the pandemic (May 2020), to simple rural buildings dating back to the mid-19th century, to the Classically embellished commercial buildings of the early 20th century that line Northern Boulevard.

Wishing all of you a healthy and safe journey throughout time!

—Pamela Broderick

SEE IN THIS ISSUE:
- Little Neck-A New Vision
- Making Masks
- Transformations: Remaking of a 100-Year-Old House
- Queens Modern

MAKING MASKS

Local resident Andrea Licari-LaGrassa offers a modern-day example of the value of sharing, time, effort, and supplies. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, she began using her sewing skills to make a few masks for Elmhurst Hospital, located at its epicenter. With the assistance of neighbors Linda Akers and Mimi Aliperti, and volunteers from the Garden Club and the Women’s Club of Douglaston, the Community Church of Douglaston, and the Douglaston Club, she assembled a small army of sewers and donors of supplies. Husband Edward LaGrassa made and cut patterns and son Hunter cut, packaged, and delivered masks at night to the car trunk of Dr. Jasmin Moshirpur Iraj, the Medical Director at Elmhurst (maintaining social distancing all the time). Andi began by just sitting at her sewing machine to make one mask at a time. It turned into a community project, producing more than 1000 hand-made reusable cotton masks.

—Margaret King
TRANFORMATIONS: REMAKING A 100-YEAR-OLD HOUSE FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Over the years, I had observed the stately house at 41-23 Prospect Avenue in the Douglaston Hill Historic District, and always wondered what it was like inside.

The corner it was situated on was beautiful if overgrown: a nearly half-acre lot, with the big square house also overlooking the sloping lawn of the adjacent half-acre property, and beyond that, the open space provided by the LIRR cut.

The view over lawn and trees seemed endless—how rare in Queens! If you looked carefully, there was also the barely-visible outline of a lawn tennis court. Only the reels and cranks for the net remained, and some collapsed fencing. The garden was a place saturated with the sadness of a once-beautiful time, long vanished.

When my clients bought the house at public auction, it had been empty for two years and was severely damaged. Hurricane Sandy had toppled the tall stucco chimney, the tile roof had failed, and water poured into the house wreaking havoc everywhere.

The handsome stucco house, built for a Vice President of the Chase Manhattan Bank in 1923, was designed by architect Albert Humble in the Arts & Crafts style. The interior layout reflected the time in which it had been built, when servants—live-in maids, a cook and sometimes a driver—were an everyday part of middle- and upper-middle-class life.

The “service” areas were a rabbit warren of small rooms. The tiny Kitchen had not changed since the house was built, including the large ceramic sink. Only the refrigerator—ca. 1970—was “new.” There was a back hall with an exterior wall hatch for the milkman, and a Butler’s Pantry with enough glass cabinetry and drawers for a vast collection of linens, silver and china.

The rest of the first floor had beautiful proportions though—tall ceilings, simple, beautiful moldings, a gracious center hall, and a sunroom with casement windows on three sides.

The house hadn’t been renovated since the 1940s and the wallpaper reflected the taste of the time—vivid florals, dark and depressing. The once-elegant Living Room had water-damaged paint peeling off the ceiling in sheets.

My clients requested what most people ask for today—a Kitchen open to a Dining area (no formal Dining Room), and both of those rooms open to a Family Room—all the while preserving the original detail and charm of the historic house.

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Shortly after Memorial Day, Pam and I set out along Northern Boulevard to begin photographing various locations from the city line westward. Despite the familiar surroundings, the emptiness of the streets and the shuttered businesses afforded an eerie feeling. American flags were hung along the Boulevard, but in this Covid year our community’s biggest annual event, the Memorial Day Parade, had been cancelled. The street scene looking westward on Northern Boulevard from Westmoreland Street on an eerily—still Tuesday mid-morning, as seen in the photo appearing here, shows an almost desolate landscape. The sadness conveyed by this photo is an important part of the history of our community, our city and our nation.

But many artifacts of Little Neck’s rich history are encountered on practically every block and corner. When Pam and I first began our photographic sojourn, we headed to the Chase Bank at 252-34 Northern Boulevard, on the corner of Little Neck Parkway. I have been banking there for 40 years and yet there was so much I had missed over that time—architecturally and historically. For example, despite my hundreds of visits to that gray stone building, I never noticed the small circular copper plate on the north side of the structure which notes that the bank is located 87.756 feet above sea level. The marker was placed there in 1932 by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (now known as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA), a government agency established in 1807 by President Thomas Jefferson to map the coastlines and waterways of the new country. But that copper marker isn’t all that I’d missed: there is also a large clock at the top of the structure, directly above the main entrance. The clock isn’t working—but that’s hardly an issue in our digital age.

Then we photographed architectural artifacts along Northern Boulevard, and met with the descendants of the Cooper and Wright families who still live in the 19th-century homes built by their ancestors just south of “The Hill,” a grassy knoll on the southeast corner at 251st Street. Their homes are partially hidden by a real estate office that originally served as a blacksmith shop then as a carriage shop. The current residents graciously invited us into their historic homes to show us their unique period style and workmanship. We thank them for their time and their warm hospitality—and their assistance in helping us preserve an era long gone by.
Another structure of historical significance is P.S. 94Q, the David Porter School at 41-77 Little Neck Parkway, where that street intersects Marathon Parkway. Pam is a graduate of the David Porter School, as is my son. But they, and the school’s community, have generally been unaware of the identity of the Civil War commander after whom the school is named. Union Admiral David D. Porter helped defeat the Confederacy by leading a group in the armada that captured the port of New Orleans in April 1862, then by running a flotilla of gunboats, filled with infantry, past Confederate batteries to assist General Ulysses S. Grant in capturing the port city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, in May 1863.

The triumph at Vicksburg, achieved one month after the better-known Battle of Gettysburg, was an equally-important Northern victory that secured Union control of the Mississippi River, virtually assuring a Confederate defeat. An American hero, Porter is duly honored by the Little Neck community and all who pass through the halls and classrooms of P.S. 94Q.

In the next installment of this series, we will explore more of the living history in the Little Neck community and we will begin a review of some of the magnificent architecture in our town. I will try, in the spirit of Jonathan Swift, to turn what has always been invisible to you into a new vision of this unique place we now call Little Neck.

—Peter Reinharz
At the Dining area, I opened up a windowless wall with French doors to an expansive new bluestone terrace overlooking the former tennis court, and that vast, sprawling, endless view of greenery and trees beyond.

The old tennis court became the “Sunken Garden” ringed by mature Japanese maples that turn a brilliant red in the fall. Other outdoor spaces were created at the back. One is the “Secret Garden,” a circular bluestone terrace with a boulder seat, hidden in a rhododendron copse that is one of the few original plantings to survive.

In the attic, three unfinished storage rooms and an abandoned maid’s room were removed to create one large open space for a Meditation Room. The room is serene, looking out into the treetops where there is a constantly changing seasonal show provided by flowering trees and the Japanese maples.

The family moved into the house in late 2019. Like everyone else, they have been locked down these past few months, unexpectedly getting to know every inch of their new home. The wife wrote me this charming note in the spring:

*The last 3 months gave us a chance to discover our beautiful home. We enjoy every corner of the house. Since the weather is getting warmer, we spend more time outdoors!!! I think the outdoor area is the best place to hang out. We all love it!!! On sunny & warmer days we lay down on the grass... it is so peaceful... love the smell of fresh green grass, the sound of the wind when all the branches swing and birds sing. it’s truly mesmerizing!!!*

There is still one more project to do, hopefully this year. We will be erecting an authentic hand-carved wooden tea house from Thailand. The tea house will be repurposed as a gazebo that will provide a covered retreat from which to enjoy the Sunken Garden—can’t wait!

—Kevin Wolfe, AIA

*Kevin is an architect and garden designer with his own practice, Kevin Wolfe Architect, PC.*
"UNSUNG AND UNDISCOVERED" MID-CENTURY MODERN QUEENS ARCHITECTURE WOWS AT DLNHS ANNUAL MEETING

Delayed because of the COVID pandemic but undaunted, architectural historian Frampton Tolbert delighted twenty-four attendees of the Douglaston and Little Neck Historical Society’s first-ever Zoom Annual Meeting on June 20, with a presentation on Queens mid-century Modern architecture.

After a brief business meeting, the virtual crowd heard from Tolbert about the “unsung, undiscovered” mid-century Modern buildings of Queens, built from the 1930s to 1970s. Queens is especially rich in these mid-20th century buildings. These buildings are representative of the Modernist architectural movement in the US which broke from traditional architectural styles based on historical precedents typical of the late 19th and early 20th century, to present a clean-lined and reductive architecture that sometimes portrayed a utopian vision of the future.

While Manhattan may have world-renowned iconic Modernist buildings like the Guggenheim Museum, Queens has more Modernist buildings than any of the boroughs, including Manhattan. These mid-century Modernist buildings provide the backdrop for everyday life in Queens, and they are often overlooked and undervalued, according to Tolbert.

The population of Queens surged after World War II, fed largely by immigration. All those new citizens needed places to live, to worship, to learn, to work, to play, and to be healed. So architects in search of work headed to Queens.

Tolbert named four architects in particular who contributed in different ways to the Modernist movement in Queens. John O’Malley (1915–1970), foremost among them, designed the Cathedral College complex in Douglaston and some 150 more buildings throughout the borough, mainly for the Catholic Church.

Join at www.dlnhs.org

Roman Catholic Church of the Transfiguration, 64-25 Perry Ave., Maspeth, by Jonas Mulokas 1962

-continued on back page
QUEENS MODERN, continued

Philip Birnbaum (1907–1996) and his associates designed more than 300 buildings, mostly apartment buildings noted for their efficiency and livability, many of them in Forest Hills and Kew Gardens. Jerome Perlstein (1924–1984) was especially noted for his design of industrial buildings, many of them in Long Island City; he adorned these utilitarian structures with complex facades featuring brick and stone veneers, concrete and glass, metal screens and mosaic tiling. Simeon Heller (1907–1969), longtime associate of the New York Society of Architects and the Queens Chamber of Commerce, designed a large variety of buildings including libraries, banks, and synagogues, among them the Little Neck Jewish Center.

Tolbert concluded by noting three Douglaston buildings that are exemplars of Queens Modern: a low-slung ranch house at 18 Beverly Road, designed by Irving Marks and built in 1956; the 1962 Douglaston LIRR station, designed by Douglaston resident Gordon Lorimer (1902–1991), who was also the Chief of the Bureau of Architecture for the New York City Department of Public Works; and 240-51 Pine Street, a Frank Lloyd Wright inspired house designed by engineer Thomas A. Arcidiacono Sr. (1922–2014) and built in 1958-1961 as his personal home. Arcidiacono was a longtime DLNHS board member and one of the leaders of the successful effort to designate the Douglaston Hill Historic District in 2004. His Pine Street house is the “newest” house within the Historic District. See Tolbert’s website queensmodern.com for more information on these and other architects and projects which have left their mark on the borough of Queens.

—Margaret King and Kevin Wolfe