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Still Chic? The Hamptons Feud and Fret, but Keep On Beckoning

By DAVID BARSTOW

James Brady, the Parade magazine columnist, was driving toward his white-clapboard home on Further Lane in East Hampton, telling funny stories about his rich and famous neighbors, when his eyes fell upon the hulk of an abandoned, unfinished home that had all the grace of a prison wing, only with larger windows.

"We have the grandchildren trained," Mr. Brady, 70, said sadly. "We tell them, 'Don't look at the yucky house,' but my granddaughter Sarah -- she's 5 -- she'll always peek, and say, 'I saw it, I saw the yucky house.' "

Despite the Ladies Village Improvement Society, which has taken a hard line against all things neon, and despite town planners who once tried to stop an East Hampton merchant from displaying Halloween pumpkins, the yucky house still stands -- both as a symbol of change in the Hamptons, and as a reminder of the annual ritual of criticism that befalls this celebrity haven each Memorial Day weekend.

Mr. Brady, who has kept a house here for 20 years, said the questions are always the same: Have the Hamptons become declassé? Have they been ruined by I.P.O. arrivistes who chug \$40 shots of Porfidio tequila with their Southwestern sushi? Have they been spoiled by hordes of "day trippers" -- words always spoken with a sneer here -- who come hoping perchance to rub elbows with Steven Spielberg at the Blue Parrot or Martha Stewart at Nick & Toni's?

"I hear that every year, and then the next year it's more popular than ever," said Mr. Brady, who, despite the eyesore mansion 100 yards down the road, declared: "Further Lane is about as good as it gets."

Propelled by a bull market and fueled by celebrity sightings, change is rippling as never before across the Hamptons, and it is challenging traditional defenses that have long served to protect the Hamptons way of life, many locals say.

The Ladies Society, the taste patrol for East Hampton, continues to issue warnings about hedge heights, but newly minted Internet magnates persist in challenging conventions with lavish landscaping. More beaches are requiring parking permits to keep people away, but more parking permits are being sold than ever. Rental prices, already steep, keep climbing, but young Wall Street traders barely bat an eye at \$45,000 for the summer season.

Town planning boards come up with new barriers, yet vineyards and potato fields keep getting plowed under for developments that look suspiciously like upscale suburbs. "Our planning board is besieged," said Hugh R. King, the Town Crier of East Hampton.

Even horse owners are feeling pinched. "I used to ride everywhere, and now there's always a trail -- and a house on it," said Nancy Hodin, an independent television producer from Manhattan whose latest project is a documentary on world population growth and poverty.

And now comes the dreaded inevitable: chain stores. In Hampton Bays, which marks the western entry to the Hamptons, McDonald's has applied for planning approval. Blockbuster Video made it into Water Mill, though this is considered a safe distance from East Hampton, where the standards are thought to be the toughest. Yet even there, right in the heart of Main Street, Banana Republic stands proudly.

Of all the affronts, on Sunday an airplane towed a banner advertisement for a chain of steak houses past the Maidstone Club, a blue-blood bastion of exclusivity in East Hampton. It may as well have been Coney Island.

"There's a lot of money floating around here, and these stores want to be in it," said a resigned Roland J. Eisenberg, co-owner of the Blue Parrot, one of East Hampton's oldest restaurants.

The money floats in on private helicopters and corporate jets and gleaming white yachts. "I just got it yesterday," said Jonathan D. Iseson, a 42-year-old hedge fund manager from Manhasset, N.Y., docking his 48-foot cruiser at the Sag Harbor Yacht Club. He downsized from a 55-footer. "I got rid of the wife, so I didn't need the space," he explained.

With the money has come increased competition for cocktail invitations, for dinner reservations, for parking spaces, for tee times. Andrew N. Weddle, 35, a real estate executive from South Carolina, said the \$7,000 he paid for a share of a beach home in East Hampton was small change for him and his banking friends, who constantly compare who has the coolest Porsche, the hottest girlfriend. He said all this while standing next to his girlfriend, Denise A. Shannon, 31, a hair designer who spoke of enduring condescending party questions about her career choice.

"Baby, don't be discouraged," Mr. Weddle told her soothingly.

It is all too much for some year-round residents who want to be left alone, though they don't exactly mind the soaring property values. "They think nothing about pulling out in front of a guy with a loaded dump truck," said Phil Berg, 50, a local contractor in East Hampton.

But if the Hamptons are under siege from interloping yuppies, it is also true that they are also under assault from established residents who bicker constantly over how much is too much. Exhibit A, of course, is Ira Rennert's planned construction in Sagaponack of a 60,000-square-foot castle with 25 bedrooms and 39 bathrooms.

Mr. Brady said that he was opposed to the house because it would be too big. His latest book, "The House That Ate The Hamptons" (St. Martin's Press), is based on the Rennert compound.

But there are lesser known examples, such as the estate on Wiborg Beach in East Hampton, known as the "T.W.A. House" for its hangarlike appearance. Esthetics aside, many here consider the home in bad taste because a wall juts from the house and partly blocks the view from the house next door, which is owned by Herbert Ross, the film director, and Lee Radziwill, sister of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. (The owners tried to resolve the matter by placing holes in the wall.)

Or this: Mortimer Zuckerman, the co-publisher of The Daily News, installed a large satellite dish in front of his beachfront home in East Hampton, which prompted angry protests from a neighbor, which led to a dispute, which resulted in the dish coming down, which led the neighbor to commission a sculpture of Don Quixote riding toward Mr. Zuckerman's mansion, his jousting staff rising some 50 feet.

"We are the only people in the Hamptons who have never sued their neighbors," joked Jerry Della Femina, the advertising executive and restaurateur who lives two houses down from Mr. Zuckerman.

Technically, Mr. Della Femina is telling the truth. But it is also true that he once successfully sued the village of East Hampton after he was arrested for displaying pumpkins in front of his food market. He keeps a life-size cardboard blowup of him being led off in handcuffs.

For all the griping, there are few signs of an exodus from the Hamptons. The author Kurt Vonnegut, who lives near the Rennert compound, has told friends that "the Hamptons are finished." He hasn't moved yet. Nor have dozens of other celebrities from the worlds of fashion, art, business and film. Alec Baldwin has practically made a second career of writing cranky letters to the local papers.

For all the fuss, the old rhythms of Hamptons life endure. Parents still take their children on pilgrimages to The Fudge Company in Southampton. And Mr. King, the Town Crier, still leads walking tours of East Hampton by the light of a lantern. Residents continue to take up collections for worthy causes -- such as new sails for the picturesque windmills that dot the countryside.

And always, there is the scene at the beaches, still ranked among the finest in the United States. Late Sunday morning, a young woman in an aqua bikini and Chanel sandals walked up to lifeguard Paul Gebbin and asked him to rub suntan lotion on her back. "I was in Mexico last week and got fried," she said, as Mr. Gebbin, who works during the week as a prison guard, took his sweet time with the lotion.

For those who don't want crowds, there is always peace to be found behind the tall privet hedges that surround many of the mansions. This is so at Mr. Della Femina's place, just around the corner from Martha Stewart's home on Lily Pond Lane in East Hampton. Late Sunday night, Mr. Della Femina stood on his stretch of beach, smoking a Thomas Hinds cigar, watching his friends enjoy the sunset and a bonfire. Whenever there's a storm, he said, laughing, sand from Calvin Klein's place washes down on his beach.

"I get designer sand!" he said in a way that suggests life is good.

Realtors keep calling him with tempting news about the value of his house, which he bought for \$3 million in 1987. They tell him he could get \$10 million, \$11 million, \$12 million. Up, up, up.

But if you are a man like Jerry Della Femina, you think about how much it would cost to buy the same sort of place in Nantucket or some other playground, and you think about

being 100 miles from Manhattan, and you come to the only possible answer to such blandishments: "It's fake money," he said.

The bonfire is burning low, and the setting seems so common, so suburban, if you overlook the fact that Mr. Della Femina's home was in *The New York Post* that day, which published a "Key to Celebrity Homes" in the Hamptons. (His came just after Steven Spielberg's and before Sting's.)

"Who wants Godiva s'mores?" called out his wife, Judy Licht, a television reporter for WABC, after she had run out of Hershey's chocolate.

It is like some scene out of a J. Crew catalogue, except there is a double agent here. Her name is Jodi Della Femina, the 31-year-old daughter of Mr. Della Femina. As a co-owner of the East Hampton Independent and the Southampton Independent newspapers, she is a true Hamptons insider. But she also has just written "Jodi's Shortcuts '99," which offers helpful hints on how to penetrate all the Hamptons's defenses, including, most flagrantly, how to avoid traffic by threading the maze of Hamptons back roads.

"I actually wrote step-by-step instructions," she said. "This is, like, criminal."

Ms. Della Femina has her rationale for the book -- "Why should everybody have to go to the same three restaurants when there are 200?" -- but she knows that the argument is suspect, and she expects to pay a price.

"I've given up some of my true favorite farm stands, and I know I'm going to have to wait in line now," she said.