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The joys of living in New York's utopian planned communities



TUDOR CITY A neighborhood resident of 41 years, retired flight attendant Katherine Thomas raves about the planned community's pastoral vibes and friendly neighbors. Annie Wermiel/NY Post

In 1932, Frank Lloyd Wright, America's greatest architect, unveiled a suburban model town he called Broadacre City. Like many utopian plans, it included everything from monorails (for easy transport) to prefabricated housing (for quick setup and lower costs).

Though no Broadacre City was ever built, in 1947, a disciple of Wright's founded a planned community in Pleasantville, NY, called Usonia — after Wright's famous single-story ranch house that was the successor to his earlier Prairie style.

Wright himself designed the street plan of Usonia along with three of the development's homes, including the mushroom-topped 1948 Sol Friedman house, a circular gem that was recently on the market for \$1.5 million.



USONIA Frank Lloyd Wright designed this circular house, recently listed for \$1.5 million, in a planned utopia within Pleasantville, NY. Maksim Akelin

At least four Usonia homes were for sale this year, the 150th anniversary of Wright's birth. And though none is publicly listed right now, meaning no obvious path to buy into his futuristic vision, there are plenty of other planned communities in and around New York — from Midtown East's Tudor City to Jackson Heights in Queens — where city dwellers can embrace utopianism and its harmonious, communitarian principles.

Wright was by no means the first visionary to embrace the idea. In fact, America's first planned community, Llewellyn Park, debuted 70 years earlier in West Orange, NJ. With homes nestled in a bucolic streetscape sculpted by the country's preeminent landscape architect, Andrew Jackson Downing, the idea was to build a town only 12 miles from Manhattan where residents would be constantly surrounded by nature.

Since its 1857 founding, Llewellyn Park not only continues to embrace its original aim, but is the direct ancestor of every gated community in the country. (Fun fact: Downing's assistant, Calvert Vaux, would embrace the same picturesque principles when he co-designed Central Park.)

A number of Llewellyn Park properties are currently on the market, from a four-bedroom Colonial Revival at 59 Glen Ave. for \$789,000 to a more modern mansion, a five-bedroom, four-bathroom at 100 Mountain Ave. for \$1.49 million. Both are repped by Sam Joseph of Berkshire Hathaway.



LLEWELLYN PARK A visionary landscape architect designed the area in 1857 with lots of greenery. Its 100 Mountain Ave. is on the market for \$1.49 million.

Despite its pastoral charms, the allure of living in a place like Llewellyn Park took some time to catch on. In 1869, millionaire department-store magnate A.T. Stewart bought up 10,000 acres near Hempstead, Long Island, to launch his own attempt at a carefully planned commuter suburb.

Embracing a zoning ethos where town and country mixed, he dubbed his new enclave Garden City. In its early days, though, few of his monied contemporaries followed him out of the city.

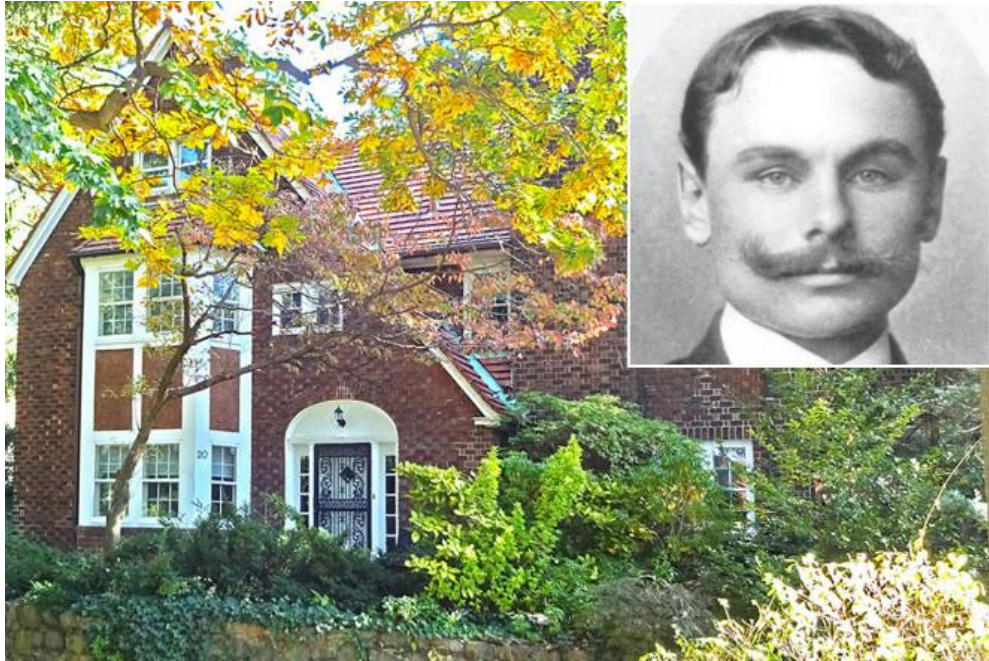
(Six full years after Garden City's founding, a mere seven passengers boarded the Long Island Rail Road [LIRR] each morning to head into the city.)

Stewart's vision eventually took hold. One of the area's oldest houses, a six-bedroom Italianate spread at 95 Ninth St. that dates back to 1878, is hitting the market this spring asking \$2.35 million, repped by Lisa Fedor at Coach Realtors.



Steps from the Garden City Hotel, a venue for lodging, dining and entertainment that Stewart saw as the centerpiece of the community, the updated home retains much of its 19th-century detailing, while the surrounding neighborhood still reflects Stewart’s desire to mix urban amenities with rural charm.

When Stewart first began acquiring land in Nassau County, the concept of “garden cities” (lowercase!) didn’t exist. But across the pond during the 1890s, English author and utopianism disciple Ebenezer Howard proposed an idealized community that he believed would improve the lives of urbanites by putting them back in touch with nature.



FOREST HILLS GARDENS A \$2.88 million Tudor at 20 Markwood Ave. illustrates the area's purpose as devised by co-founder Grosvenor Atterbury — to be a bucolic retreat close to the city.

His book “To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform” spread the garden city movement across England and to America, where New Yorkers picked up the mantle of development in their own city, newly expanded to five boroughs (in 1898). Forest Hills Gardens and Jackson Heights — then two sparsely inhabited areas of Queens — soon became vital planned communities.

Designers Grosvenor Atterbury and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (son of Central Park's other co-creator) lined the meandering streets of Forest Hills Gardens with Tudor-style single-family homes.

They also dotted the landscape with private parks and gardens, making the area a veritable gated community without a gate.

By contrast, the developer of Jackson Heights, Edward A. MacDougall, opted for apartment buildings — some of the very first co-ops in the city — built around manicured courtyards intended for residents only. A 10-building complex named Linden Court, surrounding a meticulously landscaped space, opened in 1919. It was followed by other evocatively named structures — Hampton Court, the Chateau and Spanish Gardens among them — which gave Jackson Heights a civilized, tranquil vibe that exists to this day. A jazzily renovated one-bedroom in Linden Court is currently asking \$398,500 with Core.



JACKSON HEIGHTS Apartment buildings in this Queens nabe surround leafy courtyards. This jazzy one-bedroom in Linden Court wants \$398,500. CORE

Looking for something bigger? A 1920 six-bedroom, four-bathroom Tudor in Forest Hills Gardens with nearly 4,000 square feet of interior space at 20 Markwood Road is on the market through Terrace Sotheby's International Realty for \$2.88 million. It faces Olivia Park, one of the many small green spaces that hew to Ebenezer Howard's Garden City template. Retreats like these give Forest Hills Gardens the distinct feeling of being far removed from the city, even though Manhattan is a mere 16 minutes away via the LIRR.

As these outer-borough neighborhoods were taking off, developers weighed how to bring planned community-style living into the heart of the city itself. In 1927, Fred French began what was later described as "the largest single residential project" in New York: Tudor City. (Clearly, the Tudor period was popular at the time, from the half-timbered facades of Forest Hills to the Gothic touches of Tudor City.)

Today, the East Side neighborhood's 11 co-ops boast more than 5,000 residents. Originally, its center was a park for residents and a miniature golf course. The club-and-ball sport was all the rage, and Jackson Heights boasted nine full-size holes. Eventually the putt-putt green was replaced by another garden; today, these spaces, managed by a cadre of volunteers through the nonprofit Tudor City Greens, provide a sanctuary flanking East 42nd Street.



The tight-knit Midtown East enclave, built in 1927, now has 11 Gothic-style co-ops that house 5,000 residents. Annie Wermiel/NY Post

Katherine Thomas, a retired flight attendant who has lived in Tudor City since 1976, is currently selling her studio at 25 Tudor City Place for \$350,000 through Douglas Bellitto and Rachel Glazer at Brown Harris Stevens.

“Tudor City is a little oasis in the middle of Manhattan,” says Thomas, 67. She loves that “people are walking their dogs at all times” and the fact that “there is no through traffic makes it more special and private.”

A fellow resident of 16 years, Curt Cathje, who writes the blog Tudor City Confidential, concurs. “Tudor City’s sense of community has everything to do with its two parks, which act as a buffer against the bustle of Midtown,” he says. They provide a “unique feeling of seclusion and serenity.”

Planned communities aren’t without their detractors. In 1980, Harry Helmsley — who then owned Tudor City — attempted to secretly demolish the parks over Memorial Day weekend so that two new towers could be built. “Residents were awakened by a bullhorn shouting, ‘Emergency! Everyone to the north park!’ ” Thomas recalls. “Little old ladies ... went and sat in the park to prevent the bulldozers from moving. And the parks were saved. That’s the power of the sit-in!”

During the postwar period, utopian societies became passé — until the 1970s arrival of Battery Park City, the Lower Manhattan mega-development partially built on land dug up from the original World Trade Center’s construction and dumped along the Hudson.

Since the entire neighborhood is owned by the Battery Park City Authority, the residences are property tax-free; instead, payments in lieu of those taxes go toward the upkeep of the mile-long river-fronting esplanade and the pocket parks that are so treasured by residents. The area's redevelopment boom has attracted high-end malls such as Brookfield Place (located in the former World Financial Center) and Westfield (under the World Trade Center site) and tenants such as the Apple Store and Eataly.

Anne Rossi, a 26-year resident of Battery Park City and a broker for Corcoran, likes that Battery Park City can be "both city and country" at the same time. "It feels like you are in a village," Rossi, 59, says of the narrow, 92-acre ribbon of condo and rental buildings. "Because we are kind of compact, that really brings people together," she adds, at places where activities from poetry readings to bird watching sponsored by the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy are held, such as the Community Center at Stuyvesant High School or the local ball fields.



BATTERY PARK CITY This relatively new NYC neighborhood, which hugs the western edge of Lower Manhattan, started out slow but is now a favorite of residents for its events and green spaces. Shutterstock

A neighbor, American Express exec Neha Arya, agrees: "From the numerous all-year events and installations at Brookfield Place, the block party, the P.S. 89 and 276 events, to the fantastic spaces and parks, I do feel a sense of sharing and community with my neighbors."

Rossi is marketing a \$995,000 one-bedroom at 225 Rector St., one of the newer buildings in the complex, complete with a pool, gym membership and a communal rooftop with stellar views.

At first, people did not flock to Battery Park City. (In the 1980s, walking around Lower Manhattan at night seemed less like utopia and more like "Westworld.") But even as community planning lagged in New York, its mantle was being taken up across the country

by the so-called “new urbanists.” The success in the late ’80s and early ’90s of towns such as Seaside, Fla., and Kentlands, Md., was concrete evidence in favor of intentionally designed places with central downtowns, walkable streets, varied architecture, and a (sometimes forced) sense of place.

These communities derived inspiration from Jane Jacobs’ 1961 “Death and Life of Great American Cities” and infused suburban developments with her urban thinking.

Today, that new urbanist ethos is coming back (albeit in reverse) to a once-industrial neighborhood via Pacific Park, the 22-acre Brooklyn development built over rail yards. The giant project started with Barclays Center and will one day include 6,430 rental, condo, and affordable rental units surrounding an 8-acre green space.

The first condo building in the complex, 550 Vanderbilt, started closing late last spring, and developer Greenland Forest City Partners hopes to finish construction by 2035. Pacific Park’s mixing of residential and retail spaces, plus its emphasis on connecting to the natural environment, are intended to meet inhabitants’ every need while fostering a sense of camaraderie.

Ultimately, these simultaneous goals are both a feature and bug of many planned communities: having everything you need within easy reach provides comfort and convenience, but it can be insulating and isolating, too. That’s why a pastoral (or at least public space-filled) landscape is key.

From Frank Lloyd Wright’s scenic, wooded drives in Usonia and Andrew Jackson Downing’s verdant Llewellyn Park to the cozy gardens of Tudor and Battery Park cities, developments that cater to residents in a holistic way have become so much more than just exercises in urban planning. They’re true made-in-New York success stories.