

JULY/AUGUST 2007

cottageLiving

COMFORT SIMPLICITY STYLE

inviting
porch makeovers

fresh ideas
for outdoor living

our top 10
cottage neighborhoods

Relax
in Style



Community Profile

LOCATION: Queens, New York; 20 minutes and four subway stops from Manhattan on the express line

NUMBER OF HOMES: 660 houses, 220 townhouses, and 11 apartment buildings with 631 units

WHAT \$300,000 WILL BUY YOU: a one-bedroom apartment

FOR MORE INFO: foresthillsrealestate.com

Forest Hills Gardens Queens, NY

This is the model cottage community, designed almost a century ago and emulated ever since

I LIVE IN NEW YORK CITY, a place known more for high-pitched change than a slow, neighborly pace. But my community, Forest Hills Gardens, feels magically removed from all the bustle. Stop at any random corner, look around, and the view is almost the same as it was nearly a century ago. Maybe that's why this original of cottage communities still inspires many newer developments that seek to replicate its simple yet timelessly effective design.

Forest Hills Gardens—not to be confused with nearby Forest Hills—is a small community (142 acres) laid out in 1910 by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the premier landscape designer of his era. In the United States, Forest Hills Gardens is the granddaddy of what might be termed the planned, pedestrian-scale community. Its influence is visible everywhere, from Shaker Heights, Ohio (begun in 1912), to more recent developments, especially those of the popular New Urbanism movement.

"I wish I could get it as perfectly as Olmsted did," says Andrés Duany, a founder of New Urbanism. "He was the master, and I'd be happy to get even close to that level of design."

Olmsted's gift was that he was equal parts landscape architect and social engineer. When planning Forest Hills Gardens, he chose to curve the streets—not to avoid any particular impediment but simply to promote a feeling of calm. This was an innovation at the time. The effect slows traffic, both auto and pedestrian, to a more leisurely pace.



COTTAGES TURNED
at angles create
common spaces
where neighbors
can meet and
landscaping can
flow together.

Olmsted was also partial to small parks. The larger a park, he believed, the higher the risk that visitors would move about behind a veil of urban anonymity. (Interesting, since his father was the visionary behind Manhattan's Central Park.) So rather than one big space, Forest Hills Gardens boasts four smaller parks. They are used abundantly, in all seasons, by residents of all ages. In fact, you can't really move through the neighborhood without passing by or through one of them, and since park space means social space, my wife always reminds me to factor in 20 minutes for chitchat.

Even the houses feature subtle touches meant to foster a sense of community. Many of the cottages are the work of Grosvenor Atterbury, an esteemed architect notable for designing the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A bit of a utopian, Atterbury built Forest Hills Gardens homes in the Arts and Crafts style. He elected to attach many houses to one another. Your home is not a castle, he seemed to be saying. You share your walls, your roof, your drainpipes with those around you.

But not all connect; that would be too predictable and, well, boring. Forest Hills Gardens includes a number of cottage clusters with small homes turned at angles to create informal common spaces. "Live here and you are simply going to know your neighbors," says Scott Marcus, an 18-year resident.

Like the houses, the neighbors tend not to look—or cook—the same. The 6,000 residents of Forest Hills Gardens are a diverse lot, hailing from all over the world. My twin 5-year-old sons attend kindergarten >

“Stop at any random corner, look around, and the view is almost the same as it was nearly a century ago”



THE IDEAL NEIGHBORHOOD grows into its surroundings over time so the whole scene, from house to roofline to overarching tree, looks as if it grew together.



JUSTIN MARTIN (who wrote this piece) and his family, in front of their four-bedroom townhouse, enjoy the neighborhood's sense of small-town escape.

“Thankfully, the well-designed community is not a thing of the past”

at the School in the Gardens, a first-rate public school. They’ve had the opportunity to try a variety of dishes, from Chinese and Greek to Moroccan, that their classmates bring on holidays.

To preserve the uniqueness of this neighborhood, Forest Hills Gardens has an active—obsessive, some would say—property owners’ association. Without the group’s blessing, you can’t make modifications to the outside of your home. When my next-door neighbor wanted to repaint the trim on his house, he had to figure out the precise green that wouldn’t clash with the rest of our row.

It may sound irritating, but this persnickiness maintains the neighborhood in a classic and harmonious style. It’s key to preserving the illusion that New York City is a million miles away.

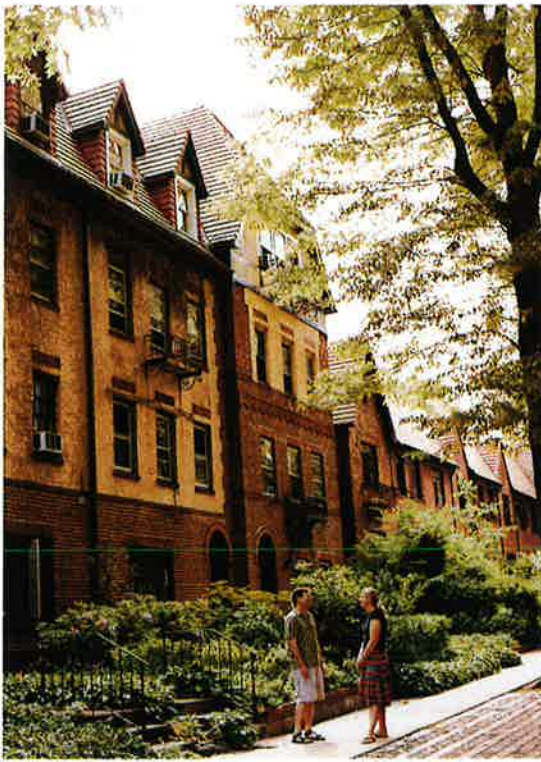
Fortunately, that is just an illusion. In a matter of minutes, I can walk out of Forest Hills Gardens and into a dense, urban scape where I run errands or stroll off to Austin Street (Forest Hills’ main shopping drag) for lunch. To get way into the city, I hop on the subway or a commuter train and emerge 20 minutes later in Midtown Manhattan.

All of these subtle elements—curved streets, mixed housing, small parks, diversity, and a connection to a larger urban environment—amount to an ideal neighborhood: the original cottage community. I grew up in a small town in Kansas, and I’m happy my children will have the luxury of a similar experience, only in a much larger city, during a much faster age.

Thankfully, the well-designed community is not a thing of the past. The remaining nine cottage communities featured on pages 80–94 build upon Olmsted’s prototype while adopting new solutions to common development problems.



WELCOME TO STATION SQUARE, gateway to Olmsted's urban-planning masterpiece and a wonderful meeting place that connects residents for work and play.



BY DESIGN, this row of townhouses fosters a sense of community and adds another layer to the housing options.



SMALL PARKS keep Forest Hills Gardens on an intimate scale, slow traffic, and offer a break on an afternoon walk.



COTTAGE THOUGHT:

New Urbanism is an increasingly popular movement that espouses a traditional approach to modern development. The idea is to create more integrated, balanced, livable, and sustainable communities that can be a positive solution to disconnected sprawl and the isolated “McMansion” neighborhood.

Andrés Duany of Miami’s DPZ Architects is one of the founders of New Urbanism. He believes, as we do, that Olmsted’s Forest Hills Gardens (FHG) embodies the ideal in neighborhood design. Andrés discusses his favorite elements of FHG, features that reappear in his designs as well as in each of our Top 10 communities:

- **The community transcends its surroundings.** Some folks might not think of Queens as New York City’s most appealing borough, but the design and planning of FHG have allowed it to become something totally unexpected.
- **The neighborhood has a real core with high density and mixed-use housing.**
- **It’s hooked onto a transit system.**
- **Olmsted’s detailing of sidewalks, curbs, and street signs is the best in the country.**
- **FHG is filled with beautiful landscaping and good architecture.**
- **The street layout connects smoothly to the existing Queens grid system but keeps its own leisurely pace with Olmsted’s curving design.**

Forest Hills Gardens



Curved streets

Shared green space

High density and mixed-use housing

Transit system

ILLUSTRATION: GILL TOMBLIN