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Neglect, Lack of Funds Damage NYC Landmark

By LISA SELIN DAVIS

It's rumored that Staten Island is riddled with ghosts. From the tip of St. George to the infamous Fresh Kills landfill, islanders have reported unexplained balls of light floating in the sea air and a strange presence in the abandoned monastery atop Grymes Hill. But the real ghosts are architectural. Staten Island, an almost-60-square-mile borough of New York City that Henry David Thoreau once called "a little piece of country in the city," is home to a collection of once-glorious, now-forgotten buildings that make up the campus of Sea View Hospital. Sea View's 24 city-owned buildings, nine of which are still used, are rapidly decaying, victims of "demolition by neglect." Though two of the buildings are slated for renovation, and a number of people are working to save more of them, it's unclear whether preservation efforts will move fast enough to prevent the remaining buildings from completely falling apart.

Designed by New York City architect Raymond F. Almirall and built between 1905 and 1938, Sea View once was the largest and most expensive city-owned health-care facility, part of the massive campaign to eradicate tuberculosis, or the "white plague." The hospital was busiest in the 1930s, housing more than 2,000 patients.

Mr. Almirall balanced form and function, designing patient pavilions around a central octagonal kitchen, dividing men's

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and women's living quarters and connecting all of the campus's important buildings via underground tunnels. Patient rooms had views of rolling hills and let in fresh air and sunlight to help with recovery. Though Spanish Mission style elements are visible in some of the buildings, Mr. Almirall denied any particular architectural influence other than "simplicity" and "cheerfulness." To this end, he adorned the patient pavilions with brilliant terra cotta tile murals that he designed and had made in Delft, Holland, in 1914.

By the 1950s, a number of TB treatments were perfected -- at Seaview, no less -- and most of the structures on the hospital campus were abandoned, one by one. Now, skeletal remains and cracked terra cotta murals are all that's left of the buildings that Mr. Almirall considered the crown jewels of his career. With the exception of a hospital constructed on the campus in 1972, Sea View's buildings have been subject to the ravages of weather, time and the most damaging force of all: neglect.

Striving for Attention

Though Staten Island is located in the fastest growing county in New York City and New York State, it has the lowest number of landmark properties of the five boroughs. "We've had a hard time getting people interested [from] outside



Terra cotta murals designed by architect Raymond F. Almirall and crafted in Delft, Holland, adorn each of the patient pavilions on the Sea View campus.

of the Staten Island area," says Susan Tunick, president of Friends of Terra Cotta, a group fighting to save Sea View's ceramic murals. "Staten Island suffers tremendously from people not wanting to go there."

Historic Districts Council president and Staten Island resident David Goldfarb says geography is part of the quandary. "We have a hard time getting the Landmarks Commission just to come out and look at our sites," he says.

In the 1980s, the Landmarks Commission did visit Sea View, finding that both its architecture and history warranted landmark status, which it conferred in 1985. Though most of Staten Island is heavily developed, Sea View's 70-acre campus, with its resident hawks and stray cats, steep ravines, rolling hills and copper-beech trees, still feels like a bucolic getaway. And the buildings, though nearly beyond repair, are breathtakingly beautiful.

So whose job is it to bring Sea View back to life?

The answer is complicated. Though the campus's 24 buildings are under the jurisdiction of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corp., the campus is shared by the New York City Parks Department as well as the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, which are responsible for some of the structures. The Board of Education uses a piece of the campus for Wagner High School, a small parcel was sold for senior-citizen housing, and there's a piece that belongs to the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island. In all, more than 20 groups have taken up residence on the campus, from the Boy Scouts to the Staten Island Rodeo.





"You need a color-coded map to figure out who owns what," says Ms. Tunick.

In fact, Tom Matteo, chief operating officer of HHC's Sea View Hospital Rehabilitation Center and Home, the structure built in 1972, has created a map that shows the myriad tenants and government agencies that reside there. But no single organization on the campus seems to have the resources and will to revive the buildings.

Preservationists would like the city to take the lead in saving the structures, but city representatives say funding such projects is difficult.

City-owned property can be harder to maintain, says Mr. Matteo. "You can't leverage the land and buildings in getting a mortgage. You can't put up the land as collateral. [HHC] cannot put a nickel into these buildings. It's prohibited by the State Department of Health," he says. "Most of my money comes from Medicaid, and I cannot put money into a building that doesn't provide Medicaid services."

Mr. Matteo has a passion for the place. He calls the campus his kingdom and roams the grounds collecting fallen roof tiles and repairing crooked signs. He's trying to save Sea View buildings that do provide Medicaid services, including the old Catholic Church, Colony Hall and the Staff House. And he has offered tenants a break on already modest rent in exchange for investing in rehabilitation of the property. For example, the Staten Island Ballet has rehabbed the old laboratory, installing a triple-sprung dance floor on the site of the former morgue. "[It's] the best case of adaptive reuse I've seen," says Mr. Matteo.



Sea View COO Tom Matteo and the Sea View Historic Foundation will convert this former women's cottage into a museum.

But that doesn't satisfy some preservationists who feel that the city has let itself off the hook by exempting some city-owned properties, including the Sea View buildings, from landmark laws. Privately-owned landmark buildings are required a certain amount of upkeep, and facades must be preserved.

"The city can't fine the city. There is not a legal recourse to force HHC to act in an appropriate manner," says Ms. Tunick.

"The city owns the property and they just didn't put any money into it," says Mr. Goldfarb. "The city's not going to sue itself for neglect."

New Life for Sea View?

While Sea View's buildings have suffered from inattention, the rest of Staten Island perhaps has received too much, particularly in the form of residential real-estate development. As housing prices have skyrocketed in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens, buyers have started to flock to Staten Island. In addition, the borough needs housing for its rapidly aging population.

A focus on managing growth and trying to maintain some of it's all-but-lost country feel is making adaptive reuse of Sea View's buildings look more viable. In October 2003, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg invited developers to submit proposals to remake Sea View's 100,000-square-foot Nurses' Quarters building into 100 units of senior-citizen housing. Fifty studio, 10 two-bedroom and 40 one-bedroom apartments will rent for below-market rates when the project is completed in 2006.



In addition, Mr. Matteo, with the help of the Sea View Historic Foundation and its



Sea View COO Tom Matteo in front of the Nurses' Quarters, which will be renovated and converted into 100 units of senior-citizen housing by 2006.

well-known board member, real-estate developer Donald Trump, is planning to convert one of the women's cottages into a museum.

Mr. Matteo would rather preserve only a few buildings well than wage a protracted effort to preserve the campus as a whole and risk all of the buildings decaying in the meantime.

"The alternative is to rot away. [Preservationists] want the whole enchilada and they're ending up with nothing," says Mr. Matteo.

The imminent renovation of these two buildings is an exercise in compromise. Mr. Matteo hopes that his endeavor, coupled with such high-profile board members as Mr. Trump, will increase awareness of Sea View.

"If we have success here, success breeds success," says Mr. Matteo. "The bottom line is that this is truly a jewel in Staten Island that is not being used."

-- Ms. Davis is a free-lance writer in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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