

The New York Times

The Architecture of Seduction

By Guy Trebay

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Clockwise from bottom left, a ferry that is the only practical means of reaching Fire Island Pines; Horace Gifford's signature windows; a beach home damaged by Hurricane Sandy; on a boardwalk.

FIRE ISLAND PINES, N.Y. — Tucked into a square mile of dunes and scrub pine here stand 700 or so houses, and in those houses lives a population that swells according to season from a smattering of full-time residents to as many as 3,000 soon after Memorial Day.

In the past those people have included plenty of boldface types, men like Calvin Klein, David Geffen and the director Michael Bennett — but also those once celebrated and now largely lost to history: the models Joe McDonald and Robert Yoh, the photographer Sante Forlano, the fashion designer Clovis Ruffin. There are dozens more, possibly scores.

“My line to people is that the Pines is to gay people what Israel is to Jews,” Andrew Kirtzman, a longtime Pines resident and real estate developer, said recently. “It’s the spiritual homeland. There’s just a sense of history in the air, almost tangible but not quite. You just feel like you’re part of some kind of grand creation meant solely for gays.”

History is on people's minds this season, as the Pines marks the 60th anniversary of its founding: two newly published books examine a period many here see as a golden one; homeowners are returning to restore and rebuild houses inundated by Hurricane Sandy; and the Pavilion, the harborside dance hall that long served as an anchor of social life in the community, is reopening as a boldly reimagined version of an unloved structure that in 2011 was destroyed by fire.

Regeneration is a word not often associated with summer towns — ephemeral by definition and seldom more so than on an island whose geography is entirely at the command of a mercurial ocean. Yet it's in those forces, the ocean's tidal surges and ebbs, the wind-carved dunes, that clues can be seen to the particular powers this landscape has exerted on those who inhabit it, said Christopher Rawlins, the author of "Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction," an overdue monograph about a little-known architect to be released this week.

"It's an inherently erotic landscape," said Mr. Rawlins, who found in Mr. Gifford's work motives and inspirations of a kind that were once considered joyous, until a plague came along and cloaked them with a shroud.

"The Stonewall generation invented what I call this architecture of seduction," Mr. Rawlins said, referring to a style marked by spare interiors engineered to foster outdoor living; by spare but theatrical geometries; and by stage effects like mirrored ceilings and expanses of window wall.

Throughout the late '60s and into the '70s, men like Mr. Gifford, Harry Bates, Earl Combs, Arthur Erickson, Andrew Geller and James McCloud — not all of them gay — were kept busy erecting elegant, stark structures on this austere beautiful and fragile barrier island, houses of naturally weathering cedar, redwood pavilions set back from the boardwalk, their broad windows serving as prosceniums across which backlit players in Speedos, or else nothing, played out a specific variant of the theater of late 20th century gay life.

The beautiful men who occupied those houses are the focus of another new book due to arrive this week: "Fire Island Pines: Polaroids 1975-1983," by the photographer Tom Bianchi.

For decades, the pictures in that book lay in boxes at the photographer's Palm Springs, Calif., residence; when he finally retrieved them, Mr. Bianchi explained last week, he was startled to discover a trove recording not merely hundreds of muscular bodies, but a record of a forgotten place and time.

"I was living in Manhattan, a young lawyer at Columbia Pictures, and at a conference they gave each of us the SX70 camera," Mr. Bianchi said by telephone. "I took it to Fire Island, where I had a summer home, and in fairly short order I realized this is a way of documenting an experience and a place the world really didn't know about."

Eventually Mr. Bianchi would abandon his job as a lawyer to take up art and to produce a series of books of soft-core homoerotica. He would also become the second largest consumer of SX70 Polaroid film in the United States.

True, the images he created focus largely on buff young men disporting themselves. But they also capture something far less obvious: the exuberance of a culture in transformation, of a generation discovering itself in what Mr. Bianchi termed "a gay Brigadoon."

"I was the young, lonely gay boy in the Midwest who had no idea paradise existed," Mr. Bianchi said. "Everything about the Pines was new, the very idea of a place where you could play on the beach and hold hands with a guy and be with like-minded people and dance all night with a man."

Difficult to remember in an era of marriage equality and widespread social acceptance of gay people, Mr. Bianchi added, is the social and political tenor of those decades when in many places it remained illegal for two men to dance together in public, when stereotypes of gay men as "sick deviants, weak and ineffectual and involved in sterile, unimportant relationships" still held sway.

The AIDS pandemic would soon enough give the lie to those stereotypes, as gay people, responding to government inaction, formed ad hoc activist groups like ACT UP to devise networks of treatment and care. In hindsight AIDS casts a shadow over Mr. Bianchi's pictures of men roughhousing and coupling and gamboling and, yes, shaking tambourines. But the disease was unknown when Mr. Bianchi began taking his pictures, and thus the Polaroids offer an evocative glimpse of a community composed of what he termed "the brightest, most imaginative people on the planet, people at the top of their form in every field," before many of them died.

Consider the cast of characters living in the Pines in those years, said Mr. Kirtzman, one of a team of investors who in 2010 bought the majority of the commercial real estate in the Pines, including the Botel, the former Bay Bar, the Blue Whale and the Pavilion. "You had Calvin Klein, Perry Ellis, Angelo Donghia, and they were only the most well-known denizens," he said.

There were many others, he added, men like Andy Tobias, the journalist and author who has been the treasurer of the Democratic National Committee since 1999. There were movie stars and Broadway stars and television actors and a parade of high-profile transients out for the weekend, people like Luciano Pavarotti or Yoko Ono or Liza Minnelli or the singer Peter Allen.

There was Jerry Herman who, disembarking from the Fire Island ferry one afternoon soon after his "La Cage aux Folles" had swept the Tony Awards, was given a standing ovation by all the partygoers at the Pavilion for the boozy ritual called afternoon tea.

While gay people may no longer "need to take shelter from a hostile world back in reality," as they once did, said Mr. Kirtzman, there remains something precious about a community formed by a once-marginalized people, a place safeguarding if not always celebrating difference. (As Larry Kramer, Edmund White, Andrew Holleran and others have pointed out, the Pines population skewed white and prosperously middle class.)

"There is a big difference between having to inhabit a ghetto and forming a community," Mr. Kirtzman said.

For Matthias Hollwich, the architect whose HWKN designed the muscular new Pavilion, a building notable for its retractable roof, its multiple levels and the diagonal struts that enliven the bayside ferry landing without overwhelming it, the "revitalization of the Pines represents a generationally new area of thinking" in the broader gay community.

"Yes, there is more and more acceptance with gay marriage and being part of the legal structure," he said. "But there's also this moment where the gay community wants to remain somehow different from the norm and the majority. It's not about hiding. But it's also not about blending in."

The apparent emphasis on perfected surfaces that once enraged conservative critics like Midge Decter, who derided all the pulchritude — there was no muscularity that did not suggest “some activity whose end point is not beauty,” she wrote — now looks to have been an early indicator of the drift a narcissistic culture was taking anyway. And what once looked like licentiousness, flamboyance and bacchanalian behavior seems tame in an era of adolescent sexting and phones with downloadable hookup apps.

The history of the Pines, Mr. Rawlins said, is one of “people who had felt like outcasts finding community.” The free sexuality he celebrates in his book “was probably a natural outgrowth of what happens when you repress a people for 2,500 years.”

When Albert Goldman visited Fire Island in 1972 to produce one of his signature pieces of cultural anthropology for New York magazine, Mr. Rawlins said, he declared that he had seen the future and it was the Pines.

“Goldman talks about the amazing feeling he got in the Pines,” Mr. Rawlins said. “He describes it as the calm of people who have made it, which you can read as crass, ‘Oh, they’re rich,’ but which I read as having to do with people leaving behind their baggage when they come to a place where they can entirely be themselves.”

Not satisfied with examining the formal dimensions of Horace Gifford’s architecture, Mr. Rawlins made it a point to incorporate its countless erotic ones. “This pool is where they filmed the action scenes in ‘Boys in the Sand,’ ” he explained on a late spring tour of the Pines, referring to a gay pornography classic by Wakefield Poole.

In the Pines, Mr. Bianchi said, “We as gay men were finally able to let go of the judgments we’d internalized, to take each other’s hands and help each other explore.”

Sexual desire, like gravity, he added, is an irresistible “force holding us to the planet.” The period his book documents, in the last moments before a random virus laid waste to a generation of gay men, “was a very sexy and a very sexual time.”

“But it wasn’t a shallow experience whatsoever,” he said. “I met some pretty incredible people. We certainly loved.”

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As the Pines is rebuilt after damage from a fire and a hurricane, photographers and others revisit the years before both AIDS and, later, broader social acceptance of homosexuals. A number of the modernist homes that dot the Pines and are featured in the book "Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction," an overdue monograph about a little-known architect to be released this week. Credit: Fire Island Pines Historical Preservation Society



"It's an inherently erotic landscape," said Christopher Rawlins, the author, who found in Mr. Gifford's work motives and inspirations of a kind that were once considered joyous, until a plague came along and cloaked them with a shroud. Credit: Bill Maris

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From “Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction.” Credit: Tom Yee



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Another image from "Fire Island Modernist: Horace Gifford and the Architecture of Seduction."
Credit: Michael Weber

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The remodeled Pavilion, still under construction. Credit: Karsten Moran for The New York Times



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http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/fashion/looking-back-on-fire-island-pines-and-its-importance-to-gay-culture.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&hpw