



Architect's Corner: Lessons from the past: What neighborhoods tell us

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The most basic definition of a neighborhood is the generated social interaction among people living near one another. Neighborhoods are a social unit larger than households and not directly under the control of a government structure.

New York City is mostly a mosaic of neighborhoods. Although they have changed a great deal —i.e., their shifting ethnic composition, etc.— the essential elements to raise families to respect and protect each other still are very valid.

Rosebank is located on the east shore of Staten Island. From the shore line, an unbeatable view of the Narrows and Manhattan make its waterfront the visual checkpoint for any vessels entering New York.

To the north, the rail line sets its border as the expressway to the west. On the south side, the demarcation with neighboring Shore Acres is less clear.

Rosebank became a community of Italian immigrants at the end of the 1800s. Mostly blue collar workers; they held tight to the old country customs and religion. □

WIDTHS OF STREETS □

Three major streets, Bay Street, Tompkins Avenue and Hylan Boulevard, are its major arteries. All three have narrower widths than most Island roads.

The width of streets is extremely significant to the character of a neighborhood. Because of it, traffic flows at a lower speed and pedestrians clear crossings more rapidly and safely. Shopping is enhanced by the closer distance, since it is possible to scan store windows from the opposite sidewalk.



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AIA

The Rosebank waterfront offers a commanding view of the entry to New York; narrow, alley-like streets in the town are intimate and personal; neatly kept homes offer little doubt residents feel pride of place.



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Among the three roads, Bay Street holds the most commercial uses. Its structures typically are three-story, pre-World War II buildings with commercial uses on ground level and residences above.

These old structures provided no parking, obviously not a requirement when they were built. As a result, they are more convenient to local shoppers, although off-street parking has been generated by new commercial developments, helping the continuity of older establishments and serving the influx of non-resident shoppers.

Not as vibrant, Tompkins Avenue features fewer retail spaces. The street dimension is similar to Bay Street, making it manageable from a pedestrian view.

The section from Hylan Boulevard to Lynhurst Avenue is the epicenter of Rosebank. It is here that the annual Our Lady of Mt. Carmel feast takes place. St. Joseph's R.C. Church, the social club, the Post Office, the playground and the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum are anchors within this community.

Most buildings on this stretch are 50 years or older, three-story or less. From here, taking Chestnut Avenue eastward, right behind the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum, we enter a residential area that dates back to the early 1900s and beyond. The houses are very close to the streets and placed on their lots with no apparent guidelines. The result is a wide variety of generated yards and open spaces totally estranged from modern Staten Island.

The further from Tompkins Avenue one goes, the narrower the streets become all the way to Bell Street, finally turning left after touching the rail line fence. The street can barely fit one car lane; these are the remains of farm trails once called "nanny goat hills." From there, almost as if exiting a labyrinth, one surprisingly returns to Tompkins Avenue. □



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MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR

Rosebank possesses a scale that reflects a time gone by. The streets, the buildings and their placements in relation to property lines and neighboring structures cannot be duplicated. The walkable streets take us right by everyone's front door inviting exchanges, making social bonds — creating a neighborhood. □

Architect's Corner, written by members of the Staten Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) appears twice a month in Home.

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