

SPECIAL REPORT

Artsy city dwellers trickling into towns in South Shore others have dismissed

BY INDRANI SEN
STAFF WRITER

Roy Kortick is mesmerized by the gnomes, Virgin Marys and giant anchors adorning the lawns in Mastic Beach and Shirley, where the artist from Williamsburg bought a weekend cottage three years ago.

"Everyone's front yards are, like, altars and fountains!" he marveled on a recent drive around his adopted neighborhood. "I'm just crazy for that. I love it. I can't wait to get mine going."

But it's not just the kitsch that the 35-year-old Kortick — whose own artwork tends toward chainsaw-wielding bunnies and three-headed dogs — loves about Mastic Beach and Shirley. Through Kortick's city-weary eyes, the blue-collar South Shore neighborhoods, derided by many Long Islanders as an outpost of urban blight, are a weekend paradise of bike rides to the beach at Fire Island, romps at the William Floyd Estate and ambles along Carmens River.

That wealth of natural beauty, the quaint 1950s bungalows you still can buy relatively cheap, and the hour-and-a-half drive to New York City have inspired Kortick to embark on a mission — to build his own affordable weekend utopia for creative people.

Using as inspiration the evolution of Williamsburg during the past decade from a blighted industrial neighborhood to a sought-after hipster destination, Kortick sees Mastic Beach and Shirley becoming a weekend oasis for up-and-coming city Bohemians.

Like Williamsburg a decade ago, Mastic Beach and Shirley seem to have the magic combination of relatively cheap property and convenient access, Kortick said. "But it's wilderness access as opposed to downtown access."

Using word of mouth

Kortick, who has always enjoyed communal living, from summer camps to a year on a kibbutz to various artist colonies, started informally helping friends who visited to find their own cottages. He took a real estate class at Southampton College of Long Island University and got his license in October. Now, with the sponsorship of a local Realtor, Kortick is using word of mouth and the Internet to turn city dwellers on to what he hopes is a good thing.

"In some ways, I'm trying to build a community for myself," Kortick explained. "It would be fun to have like-minded people to have dinner parties with, or build a raft and go camping on Fire Island with."

Already, a successful young Brooklyn restaurateur has



Building a utopia

PHOTOS BY JULIA XANTHOS



Affordable property and seaside locales are starting to attract city dwellers to the Mastic Beach area. Left, Roy Kortick, sitting with dog Greta in his Shirley cottage, says he wants to cultivate an enclave for creative folks.

'In some ways, I'm trying to build a community for myself. It would be fun to have like-minded people to have dinner parties with, or build a raft and go camping on Fire Island with.'

— Roy Kortick

bought a house, his partner is in contract for another, and their chef has been looking at cottages. A yoga teacher and her astrologer husband bought one, and are considering buying another to start a yoga retreat. And Kortick is showing houses to a lighting designer, a knitting-book author and her video-game tester boyfriend, a photographer and his illustrator wife, a SoHo restaurant-owner, and a sculptor.

"They're the perfect utopian candidates, I love them," Kortick said recently at his own cottage, which he bought for \$90,000 and has stylishly renovated with frescoed walls, antique doors, limestone mosaic floors and a Norwegian wood stove.

Mastic Beach and Shirley residents haven't taken much notice of Kortick and his friends so far, he said, though there have been some unexpected encounters, such as when a group of Brooklynites on a ramble at Smith Point County Marina ran into a group of duck hunters.

"All the duck hunters were like, 'What are you guys doing out here?'" Kortick recalled. "We were like, 'What are you guys doing here?'"

Kortick's is not an original concept, said Long Island's unofficial dean of planning, Lee Koppelman, but that's all the more reason to think it might just work.

"I think it's a marvelous idea," said Koppelman, the ex-

ecutive director of the Long Island Regional Planning Board. He was reminded of the beginning of New York City's SoHo as a loft community, and of the "Tiles" club, where artists attracted to the waterside light moved out to the Hamptons in the late 19th century, starting the gentrification process there. "All it takes is one individual with a good idea and a willingness to try to push it. That's how it comes about."

Looking to the future

Mastic Beach and Shirley, where the town's new rental regulations, rethinking of development in the area, and purchases of open space has residents feeling optimistic about

the future, may be ripe for a similar phenomenon.

"The beauty of the area is that it has the same waterfront as the Hamptons," Koppelman said, "but it was kind of skipped over."

Civic leaders also welcomed Kortick's idea, though some were a tad skeptical about his rosy view of the hamlet.

"We have a lot of crack, a lot of heroin, domestic disputes, loose dogs, quality-of-life issues, unregistered vehicles, unlicensed drivers, a lot of DWI cases," said Grace Ioannidis, president of the Citizens Action Coalition. She attributed the problems to a concentration

See UTOPIA on A26

Utopian dreams along South Shore

UTOPIA from A4

of renters who receive Section 8 housing assistance. "I don't like talking about the negative, but the truth is the truth," she said. "It's moving, but very slowly."

Janice Schaefer, the president of the Mastic Beach Property Owners Association, took issue with this characterization.

"I'm not saying we don't have bad, but I don't know any community that has all good," she said. Young couples seeking affordable homes, as well as weekenders like Kortick, have started buying and fixing up properties, Schaefer said. "That's been the rebirth of Mastic Beach. That's what we need, is new ideas and new generations to keep the rebirth going."

The first Brooklynite to take Kortick's lead was his friend Mark Firth, a pioneer of Williamsburg's restaurant scene who, with his business partner, opened the popular restaurant Diner in 1998 and since then an upscale Mexican eatery and an oyster bar.

Firth, 36, and his girlfriend, Bettina, spent \$225,000 on a four-bedroom house abutting the William Floyd Estate and a mile from the beach, where they plan to bring their 11-month-old baby, Lucien, for weekends away from the concrete jungle.

"I love it there," Firth said of his house, a delicious multi-era mish-mash of brick and shingles, glass and granite, hectagon portholes and scalloped moldings. "I like Mastic Beach because it's so unpretentious and basic. All those grid streets with tiny bungalows. It's just got a nice community."

Starting a trend?

Although he says he bought his Mastic Beach house for his family to enjoy, not for its investment potential, Firth, who moved to Williamsburg 10 years ago, may have a sixth sense about real estate. He opened Diner before the south side of Williamsburg had fully transformed from blighted industrial ghetto to a neighborhood where \$1-million lofts are snapped up before they're even built.

"Everybody said I was crazy," Firth said. "Hopefully, I'll have the same luck in Mastic Beach."

Linda Peterson, the deputy commissioner of planning in the Town of Brookhaven, hopes he does. She's overseeing the town's rehabilitation plan for Mastic Beach, Shirley and part of the Montauk Highway corridor.

Town planners are crafting an ambitious set of zoning changes to make the area more welcoming and attract businesses to pedestrian-friendly downtown districts along Mastic and Neighborhood roads.

"Sandwich shops, ice cream parlors, small neighborhood



PHOTO BY JASON DECROW

Williamsburg restaurateurs Andrew Tarlow, left, and Mark Firth are hip to buying real estate in Mastic Beach.

stores, dry cleaners, beauty parlors," Peterson rhapsodized. "A coffee shop where you could get a cake and relax. . . . Things that you would think of in a little village."

Geri Larkin, a mother of three who has lived in Mastic Beach for 14 years, says she already sees improvements since she moved into the hamlet, and is glad to see it shedding the nickname "Mistake Beach."

Since the town instituted a rental permit law in 2000 that required landlords to maintain their properties and undergo inspections, Larkin said many of the houses on her street have become owner-occupied. They had their first block party last year.

"We have neighbors now in the neighborhood," Larkin said. "It used to be that you didn't know who lived across the street, who was moving in next. . . . Now it's a safe

haven for my older children, because we know everyone who lives in each house."

Haven for friends

Among Larkin's new neighbors is Maura, the owner of an interior painting company from Park Slope who did not want her last name used. Maura, 44, and her partner bought a three-bedroom cape in 2002 for \$161,500. Like Kortick, they sparked a movement among their friends, though theirs is a more urbane, professional crowd — four other lesbian couples that include teachers, a vice principal, a Realtor, investment bankers and a gift store owner have bought weekend cottages within a mile. Together, the friends go kayaking and canoeing, crabbing and kite-flying.

Maura has noticed that Long Island contractors she meets on the job have few nice things to say about Mastic Beach.

"Usually it elicits a moan and a groan, like, 'Why did you buy there?'" she said. "It seems to have this bad reputation, but we're like, 'Hey, we live in New York City, so for us, we're all very comfortable with that. That's not an issue for us.'"

Kortick had a similar reaction.

"People always talk about 'the bad neighborhood,'" he said. "I always ask where it is, and what's bad about it? . . . I guess living in Brooklyn, you have different ideas of what's 'bad.'"

Real estate is still a hobby for Kortick, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and spends his weekdays in a renovated factory space he rents in Williamsburg. He isn't advertising widely, preferring to rely on creating a buzz among friends and friends of friends.

"For me, to tour people around who I don't really know, who are just strangers, it's too weird," he said.

He's also wary of too many people discovering Mastic Beach and Shirley, having seen how gentrification changed Williamsburg.

"The longer it can keep the stigma, the better for our purposes if we want to get artists in cheap," he said.

And, despite all the positive feedback, Kortick is the first to acknowledge that his dream of a South Shore utopia may or may not materialize.

"I'm obviously really into it," he mused. "Whether it turns into something or it's just this concept is another story."

Reversing the tide of poor planning

BY INDRANI SEN
STAFF WRITER

In the 1920s and 1930s, ads in the 2-cent Brooklyn Citizen newspaper offered city dwellers the chance to "get into the Long Island boom" by buying lots in Mastic Beach.

For \$55 — \$10 down and \$3 a month for 15 months — working-class New Yorkers could have their own 20-by-100-foot pied-à-terre by the seaside.

The land, once roamed by Unkechag Indians and later part of the sprawling estates of a handful of aristocratic families, was subdivided and arranged into a dense grid between 1926 and 1938 by the Home Guardian Company, wrote civic leader Janice Schaefer in her 1994 book, "The History of Mastic Beach."

"It was a way for the working guy to have a slice of the good life," Schaefer said. "It was an affordable place for the average Joe worker."

In hindsight, however, many blame the tiny lots and narrow grid for the area's decline.

"I think it's probably one of the worst things that anyone did," said Carol Bissonette, 47, a local activist who ran as a Democrat for the area's county legislature seat last year. "What it did is it introduced urban planning into rural communities."

Still, the area became a popular getaway spot. Despite the set-

Night's Dream Spot here at
MASTIC BEACH

zen
ne and offers
of joy, health
months.
ng lot

YOU and YOUR friends will like it here!

MASTIC BEACH is located on the South Shore of Long Island, about 65 miles from Brooklyn, on the beautiful stretch of water which connects Great South Bay and Moriches Bay. Mastic Beach overlooks Fire Island Beach, and with the new Causeway which is to be built by the Long Island State Park Commission, it will be but a 5-minute drive to the Atlantic Ocean from Mastic Beach — where the State is reserving several parks along the ocean.

ALL LOTS SAME PRICE—REGARDLESS OF LOCATION—SO ACT IMMEDIATELY!

THE BROOKLYN CITIZEN,
Circulation Promotion Department,
Fulton and Adams Streets, Brooklyn, N. Y. C.

Please see that I get full information in regard to MASTIC BEACH without any obligation on my part as soon as possible.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
PHONE _____

Page Thirteen

A June 1929 ad in the old Brooklyn Citizen tries to entice city dwellers to buy a piece of vacation property in the seaside community of Mastic Beach.

Floyd Parkway, on mismanagement and corruption at the county and town levels.

"We were exploited," Hennessey said. "The people that were in power failed us."

Now, the town is trying to correct those mistakes. In 2000, it instituted a rental permit law that limits the number of tenants per unit and requires landlords to maintain minimum maintenance standards, prompting many to sell their properties, and increasing the number of owner-occupied residences. This summer, the town planning department is doing a major overhaul of zoning in Mastic Beach, Shirley and Montauk Highway, to create a combination of green space and downtown business districts.

Eric Alexander, the director of Vision Long Island, a smart growth planning group, said the area's small lots and grid-planning actually have become a virtue at a time when affordable housing is almost extinct on Long Island.

Change is already happening, Alexander said, as the area becomes more economically and racially diverse.

As for what the future holds for Mastic Beach and Shirley, Alexander said, that remains to be seen.

"The question is going to be, Who moves in?" he said. "What's the flavor of the community?"

back of the Hurricane of 1938, which wrecked or swept away 250 bungalows, there were already 1,000 property owners in Mastic in 1940, and more than 4,000 summer residents, according to Schaefer's book. By 2000, census counts show Mastic Beach's population was 11,543 and Shirley's was 25,395.

Brookhaven Councilman Edward Hennessey's grandfather, an Irish tavern-owner from Park Slope, built the family's Mastic Beach bungalow on eight lots in the 1940s. Hennessey, who grew up there in the 1970s, remembers it as a child's paradise of miniature golf and ice cream, crabbing and fishing

in Poospatuck creek.

"You could leave your door open, you could leave your bicycle outside," Hennessey said.

The community went through a change beginning in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Schaefer said. "Young people just couldn't afford a second home as the cost of living went up," she said. Many sold their parents' weekend cottages cheap to speculators who turned them into low-end rentals, some without electricity or other basic amenities.

Hennessey, 42, blames the late-century decline of Mastic Beach and Shirley, as well as the strip-mall-dotted William