

Eight Architectural Gems

Discover the loveliest buildings in Westchester.

BY: H. M. EPSTEIN OCTOBER 2004 ISSUE (PUBLISHED ONLINE JUNE 11, 2007)

The 8 Wonders of Westchester

Local architects pick the county's best—and most important—buildings.

By H.M. Epstein

In the past three centuries, across a wide range of architectural styles and building uses, many Westchester structures can lay claim to the moniker “best.” We asked a panel of leading local architects to choose their favorites. Not an easy task. Dozens made it onto the initial list, but these eight buildings—of which three were built for residential use (though one is now a public building), two for corporate and three for civic use—are representative of the best of Westchester architecture, with scores more in the wings, ready to take a bow.

Lyndhurst

(Architect: Alexander J. Davis, Style: Gothic Revival,

Location: Tarrytown, Year Built/Reconstructed: 1838 and 1865)

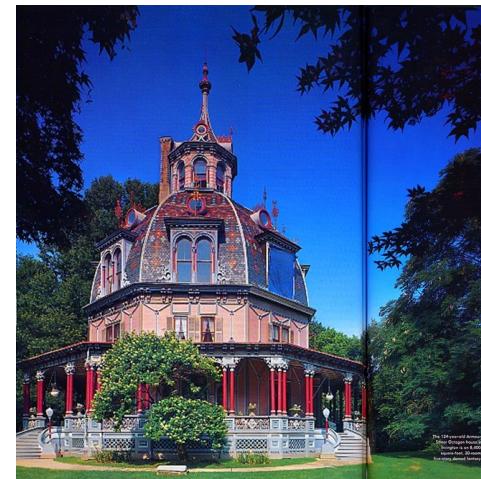
Renowned architect Alexander J. Davis built Lyndhurst, first called Knoll, as a home for William Paulding Jr., who had served as a U.S. Congressman and as mayor of New York City. What critics nicknamed Paulding’s Folly for its shockingly innovative design is our architects’ top choice for “Best Building” in Westchester.

“Lyndhurst is the one building that you have to have when you write about Gothic Revival,” declares preservation architect Robert Burton of Bedford Corners, maintaining that it is one of only two buildings in Westchester “of national and historical significance.” The other, he believes, is the Richard Mandel House (see page 68).

Decades after it was first built, Lyndhurst’s second owner, New York inventor and businessman George Merritt, decided to enlarge the property and rename it Lyndenhurst after the Linden trees on the property, and he took the remarkable step of hiring the original architect. This was unusual for the time. Wealthy patrons were more interested in following the architectural fashion of the time than committing to the notion of architectural integrity.

We’re the lucky beneficiaries of Merritt’s choice. According to architect Guy Kohn with offices in Manhattan and Millwood, Davis created a “new and changing American architectural influence.” Up until the late 1830s, he explains, “all buildings were Beaux Arts-influenced structures—all imitative.” Davis broke the mold, becoming a pioneer in the anti-Beaux Arts movement. “The movement wanted to express the notion that a house was a part of the landscape,” Kohn explains. Most agree that he succeeded with Lyndhurst.

“There are so many things to love about Lyndhurst,” declares Greenwich, CT-based architect Sean Taylor. Among what he loves are, he says, “the beautiful Gothic Revival mansion, the wonderful



THE
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PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT BURTON

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Lyndhurst Castle in Tarrytown, a Gothic Revival masterpiece overlooking the Hudson River.

conservatory and the incredible garden landscape.” The rooms, adds Mt. Kisco-based architect Vincent Franze, are surprisingly intimate. Plus the way the building relates to the landscape does not overwhelm. As Franze says, “Lyndhurst is majestic but not imposing. It’s beautiful and articulated and detailed. It remains welcoming and non-threatening.” Most important to us, it’s open to the public for tours or strolls.

Usonia

(Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright Plus His Apprentices and Disciples, Style: Organic, Location: Pleasantville, Years Built: 1948-1960)



Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was a visionary and an idealist who designed homes meant to be one with the land. His revolutionary designs impacted, for better or worse, the American architectural landscape for much of the 20th century—and they continue to today. Usonia in Pleasantville, a cluster of 47 buildings, exemplifies his vision.

Of the three homes in Usonia designed by Wright himself, two are architecturally most significant, says Kohn: “The Reisley house has a carport, a Wright innovation, and the Friedman House introduced the circle to residential American architecture, the rooms being a series of circles interconnected.”

Usonia was designed to be a community, not a cluster of individual homes. “Each circular parcel of land had common areas,” Bedford-based architect Carol Kurth notes. “The homes take advantage of the terrain. They have unique floor plans and layouts that were, for their times, very unconventional.”

“Wright was trying to make a house that the common man could afford to buy and live in,” architect Peter Gisolfi of Hastings-on-Hudson says. “He worked with natural materials. Many Usonia houses are passive solar houses, built on a south-facing slope, so they’re meant to be more self-sufficient.”

Vincent Franze believes, “Usonia is definitely significant and important, even though not everyone is a fan of Frank Lloyd Wright. Still any architect would have to concede that Wright was an innovator. He had the confidence to pursue his own ideas. You know, in some way, Usonia was a failure because it wasn’t as economical as it was supposed to be, even by the standards of that day. But Wright’s genius and effort to innovate are undeniable.”

Wright’s designs were adapted by architects across the country—often times, alas, not very well. “Many took the elements and copied them without the understanding,” says Erik Kaeyer with KG&D Architects in Mt. Kisco. “As a result, we got suburban sprawl that was supposed to reflect Wright’s ideas. They were sprouting up all over from the 1950s to early ’70s, but they don’t have that special relationship with the site.”

Most agree Wright and his team succeeded brilliantly in Usonia in creating homes that melded with their surroundings. “Love him or hate him, any architect would have to concede that Frank Lloyd Wright was an innovator,” says Franze. “There is no question about his talent.”

Richard H. Mandel House

(Architect: Edward Durell Stone; Style: International; Location: Bedford Hills; Year Built: 1935)



In 1939, the Museum of Modern Art, one of the most famous examples of the International Style of architecture, opened in Manhattan. For Westchester residents, it was “been there, done that,” because MoMA’s architect, Edward Durell Stone, had already built in Bedford the first important International Style residence in America. Erected in 1935, the Richard H. Mandel House, with its commanding view of the Croton Reservoir, is a modern example of an architectural vision from landscape to design to interiors and furnishings.

Robert Burton considers the Mandel House to be of national and historical importance. “It really is one of the beach heads for the International Style coming to America,” he says. “It was the first of his really important houses, one of his most significant works, and it showed him to be in the forefront of a style—not,” he notes, “a style I care for.” Guy Kohn likens the house to “a giant ocean liner on a hill.” For him, the “groundbreaking use of materials like cork floors, glass blocks, built-in furniture, even a heating system that is technically advanced” are what may be most impressive.

The house, by the way, is for sale. Asking price: \$4.8 million.

“I wish I had the money,” White Plains-based architect John Sullivan muses. “I’d buy it.” He loves the house, he says, especially its setting. “This house is set against a woodland backdrop as seen across a field. As you approach the house, it’s striking to the point where you have to pause just to look at it. It’s an excellent example of contemporary architecture nicely designed.”

The Octagon House

(architect: Not Known; Style: Neo-Roman;

Location: Irvington; Year Built: 1860 & Post-1872)

Eighteen hundred and forty-eight was a year of upheavals. There were uprisings in Paris and Rome and revolutions in Vienna, Venice and Berlin. In Seneca Falls, American women were meeting to demand their rights. California’s gold rush began. And Orson Squire Fowler, vegetarian, sexologist and phrenologist, published the first edition of *A Home for All*, proclaiming the benefits of eight-sided buildings. Only the latter, of course, affected Westchester’s architectural landscape.

A decade after Fowler argued for building octagonal edifices, financier Paul J. Armour, also a phrenology believer (phrenology was a popular Victorian science that suggested that the shape of the head is related to different intellectual aptitude and character traits) built a relatively simple two-story high octagonal home for him and his family. Twelve years later, the house was sold to Joseph Stiner, a successful tea importer. Stiner added a large two-story tall dome to his new home, an ornate cupola, nearly 60 columns and other flourishes—and he painted it all in more than 20 vibrant colors.

The house eventually belonged to Hudson Valley writer and historian Carl Carmer, who owned the Armour-Stiner House for three decades—from 1946 to 1976. When he and his wife were too old to care for it, the National Trust for Historic Preservation stepped in. Preservation architect Joseph Pell Lombardi purchased it from the Turst in 1978 (see accompanying story).

Dobbs Ferry-based architect Stephen Tilly, who seriously considered buying the Octagan House before the Trust bought it, calls it “a wonderful fantasy—a great mix of spectacular and oddball.”



Playland

(Architect: A. Stewart Walker & Leon Gillette; Style: Art Deco; Location: Rye; Year Built: 1928)

America's first planned amusement park began with an angry electorate and compliant politicians. The electorate were dismayed with the rowdy crowds and sleazy hotels drawn to two theme parks on the Rye beachfront. The politicians saw an opportunity to rid the neighborhood of these bad elements and turn the Rye beachfront back into a family-oriented community. So Westchester County's government had the two parks (Rye Beach and Paradise Park) razed, and asked Frank Darling, an experienced amusement park designer/operator, to plan what was to be the finest amusement park (plus beach), with an emphasis on beautiful architecture, artwork on building panels and an integrated music system to play Wagner, Sousa marches and Irving Berlin tunes.



Prominent society architects A. Stewart Walker and Leon Gillette of Walker & Gillette and landscape architect Gilmore D. Clarke considered crowd psychology concepts while laying out the park and chose to use Art Deco style for its uplifting spirit.

Carol Kurth recommends visiting Playland when it's not crowded as it is easier to appreciate the buildings. She calls Playland "a really fantastic Art Deco fantasy"—with, she says, "architecturally significant buildings as a white backdrop against the color and vibrancy of the amusements. I love the interplay of the 'serious' buildings with the colorful freeform of the rides."

For Vincent Franz, Playland offers "a little sense of time travel. You can touch the buildings and touch another time."

"It's not just great Art Deco, but also a great example of social activism," says Robert Burton. "The concept of a government creating this wonderful entertainment complex for the masses has such populist overtones."

Now you can justify your next trip to Playland as an important social and educational statement, not just loads of fun.



IBM Headquarters

*(Architect: Kohn Pedersen Fox; Style: Modern;
Location: Armonk; Year/Built: 1997)*

IBM has fathered many important buildings in Westchester, from the contemporary-style Thomas J. Watson Research Center in Yorktown designed by Finnish architect Eero Saarinen to the Edward Larrabee Barnes modernist structure in Tarrytown. However, architects begin to wax poetic when they discuss the most recent gift from IBM, the Armonk headquarters designed by the Manhattan architectural firm Kohn Pedersen Fox. "With this building," reads the firm's Web site, "we attempted to intensify the dialogue between nature and technology." The dialogue works well.

It is architect John Sullivan's favorite building. "It's nestled in the woods and very natural materials like stone and wood were used. The interior works wonderfully. It's what's known as an interior landscape layout: No matter where you are, you have a view to the outside, to the beautiful natural environment in which this building is set."

Alas, due to security, only employees, their guests and passengers on airplanes flying into or out of Westchester County Airport get to see the three-story, 301,389-plus-square-foot building anymore.

PepsiCo Headquarters

*(Architect: Edward Durell Stone; Style: Modern;
Location: Purchase; Year Built: 1970)*



Thirty-five years after he built the International style Mandel House in Bedford Hills (see page 68), Edward Durell Stone designed a corporate center for the successful upstart soda company, PepsiCo, then only five years old. Working with his son, landscape architect Edward Durell Stone, Jr., he created an outdoor sculpture garden that Carol Kurth considers “a meditative, contemplative site. It’s an ever-changing, ongoing, evolving, outdoor museum. The quality of the light, the plantings—it’s always beautiful.”

Interestingly, it’s the result of the juxtaposition of the seven interconnected pavilions with the landscape, rather than the structures themselves, that draw the most acclaim. Stephen Tilly says that he appreciates that PepsiCo understood “the importance of making a serious investment in their design,” rather than going with a more prosaic landscaping style.

Guy Kohn sees a larger mission at work here, a movement away from placing corporate headquarters in big cities. “The complex is unique because it created a far more civilized working atmosphere than in the city. It was part of corporate America’s changing attitude toward creating a more civilized living and working atmosphere.”

The grounds and the Donald M. Kendall Sculpture Gardens of PepsiCo are open to the public.

The Manor House at Philipsburg

*(Architect: Not Known; Style: Dutch Colonial;
Location: Sleepy Hollow, Year Built: 1680 and 1720)*



Although the Manor House at Philipsburg was originally built as a residence, its true purpose was the management of 52,000 acres of land along the Hudson River, much of what is now western Westchester County, granted as a charter to Frederick Philipse in 1693 by William and Mary of England. Not a bad haul. Philipse, who started as a carpenter and then became a merchant, came to the New Netherlands to work with the Dutch West Indies Company and became the richest man in the New York colony.

Many of us live on land that once was a Philipsburg Manor tenant farm. The estate was a trading complex, active farm and mill. “Philipsburg is significant for its meticulous reconstruction of workaday buildings, as opposed to grand mansions, associated with our agricultural history,” says Stephen Tilly.

Architect Erik Kaeyer adds that it’s historically significant because “it was the first significant manor property in Westchester.”

But, says Vincent Franze, the importance of the Manor House goes beyond age. “What makes it historically significant is that it’s still standing there and that it gives us a physical connection from that time period to our time period.”

Much of Philipsburg Manor has been restored and/or reconstructed. But not the stone exterior of the manor house: It is mostly original. The interior furnishings have been thoroughly researched and painstakingly recreated based on the work of historians and archaeologists. The reconstructed outbuildings on the property serve as a valuable educational facility about pre-Revolutionary Westchester.

"Philipsburg," says Tilly, "is significant as well for the stories about race and social and economic history that are now being told there."

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Praise Be for These Westchester Houses of Worship

There are as many beautiful churches and synagogues in Westchester as there are congregations to attend them. Most of our panel mentioned houses of worship they admired architecturally, however no two agreed. The one exception is Louis Kahn's contribution to Chappaqua: Temple Beth El, tucked away from sight and built into a hill. Widely considered one of the greatest architects of his time and honored several times by his profession for his lifetime of work, Kahn was best known for his spiritual approach to architecture, his use of elemental materials and geometric shapes, and his mastery of using natural and artificial light as a design tool. Temple Beth El, conceived as a memorial to a Eastern European Jewish past, demonstrates all three.

Christ Church in Bronxville (Eng Medieval style church)

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Mount Kisco

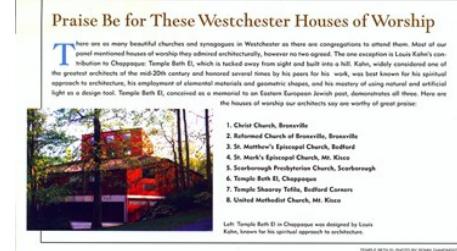
Scarborough Presbyterian Church

Temple Beth El in Chappaqua

Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford Corners

Reformed Church of Bronxville in Bronxville

United Methodist Church in Mt Kisco



OUR PANEL OF ARCHITECTS

- Robert Stewart Burton, Architect, Bedford Corners
- Vincent Franze, AIA, Franz & Franze Architecture, PLLC, Mt. Kisco
- Peter Gisolfi, AIA, Peter Gisolfi Associates Architects, Hastings-on-Hudson
- Erik Kaeyer, AIA, KG&D Architects, Mt. Kisco
- Guy Kohn, Guy Lindsay Kohn Architecture and Design, Manhattan and Millwood
- Carol J. W. Kurth, AIA, The Office of Carol J. W. Kurth, AIA, Architect, PC, Bedford
- John Reimnitz, AIA, RA, John Reimnitz Architect, PC, Manhattan, NY
- John Sullivan, FAIA, Sullivan Architecture, PC, White Plains
- Sean Taylor, AIA, Mockler Taylor Architects, LLC, Greenwich, CT
- Stephen Tilly, AIA, Stephen Tilly Architect, Dobbs Ferry