



Baby-boomer ranch houses getting a makeover on Staten Island

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By

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Those one-story Colonial ranch-style houses that many a Baby Boomer called home while growing up are getting make-overs in neighborhoods throughout Staten Island

A quick drive through several East Shore neighborhoods, including portions of South Beach, Dongan Hills, Grasmere, Arrochar, Grant City, New Dorp and Richmond, finds increasing numbers of these shingle, siding and brick-covered ranch-style homes -- most of them built during the period from the late 1950s to mid-1960s -- either have been, or are in the process of being "topped off" with second floors and/or extensions. In some cases, these houses have been leveled to the foundation and rebuilt from the foundation up, to twice their original size.

A check of Department of Buildings (DOB) records confirms the observation, with permit requests and plans on file for "major alterations and enlargements" at more than a dozen addresses on the East Shore since April and dozens more that were filed over the last 18 months.

Rosebank architect Anselemo (Sal) Genovese, president of the Staten Island chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the professional organization representing more than 50 accredited architects in the borough, said Island architects are getting more requests for design of residential alterations and enlargements, than for new construction. □

Examples of the trend are evident in a portion of South Beach, on streets such as Hickory, Biona, Jerome, Kensington, Mallory and Foch avenues and Lamport Boulevard. On one block of Kensington Avenue between Kramer Street and Hylan Boulevard, more than half the homes have added a second story, and at least one home was leveled and rebuilt from the foundation up. With construction some have been converted from one- to two-family homes.

Some long-time residents say the bigger homes are out of context with the neighborhood, with the larger two-story homes towering over existing one-story structures on the neat blocks. Other residents see the trend as an improvement.

South Beach and much of the East Shore is zoned R3, permitting detached one and two-family homes. DOB classifies the work as "alterations and enlargements" rather than new construction.



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This two-story house going up on Jerome Avenue in South Beach, in the footprint of the one-story 1960s-era ranch house that once occupied the property, towers over the neighboring ranch house at left. A number of one-story ranch homes in the immediate area have been topped-off and expanded, but some residents say the larger homes are out of context with the neighborhood.

"If it's done in good taste, something that incorporates the style and character of the original house, it's not too bad. But some of these built-up houses are just so huge, ornate and ostentatious, they stick out like a sore thumb," opined one South Beach resident, who raised his family in the one-story home he purchased on Kensington Avenue just before the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Some residents worry the trend toward larger houses will devalue their own property. "It makes my house look smaller. Who is going to want to buy my house, except to tear it up and make it bigger?" wondered one homeowner, whose well-kept ranch was left sandwiched between two houses that had gone to two floors and now tower over his roof.

Another long-time South Beach homeowner, however, said she understood the need to build up. "Our houses were new and fresh when we were young and first moved in, and a young family deserves the same. They don't want something that's 50 years old; they want more space for their family and all the bells and whistles that come with today's modern conveniences," she said.

Genovese said today's generation of home-buyers are "a lot more demanding" than the post-World War II generation, "who were proud and happy to just to own a cozy little house with a backyard for their children." "Today families have accumulated a lot more 'stuff' in terms of clothes, TVs, computers and electronics, cars and everything else, and for that alone they need more living space," he observed. □

LIVING SPACE □ □

The topping-off trend is being driven by three things: Cost, land, and the desire for more interior living space.

Its cheaper to renovate and expand than to buy or build new. Genovese said the cost of making major alterations and enlargements to an existing home are often 20 to 30 percent less than buying or building a new home.

Property and lot size is also a factor. Most ranch houses that went up just before and immediately after the opening of the bridge are set on lots 40 to 60 feet wide and 100 feet deep (40x100 or 60x100) with an average 40-foot yard in the back, offering room to build up and out. "These types of homes and their property size just lend themselves to the process," Genovese said.

The one-story homes, all built with a similar layout featuring an eat-in-kitchen and L-shaped living-dining room combo off the front and three bedrooms and a single bathroom off a center hallway in the rear, offer on average 1,200 square feet of living space. A second floor, usually accompanied by a reconfiguring of the first floor, can easily double available living space.

Another advantage to topping off is that the homeowner, working with an architect and contractor, can customize the design, rooms and features. A good architect can also create a design that's in context with older homes in the neighborhood, Genovese said. □

NO STAIRS □ □

Still, there are fans of one-story living. Some say the layout is attractive simply because the rooms are all on one floor, without stairs to climb. And as Baby-Boomers and Generation X-ers age, some predict there'll be a demand for such homes.

"In a nutshell, its the stairs. All the newer homes you see seem to have these steep steps and stairs inside and out," said one Lamport Boulevard resident who bought an older ranch house a few years ago after she and her husband sold their first house, a two-floor duplex in Rosebank.

"I got so fed up with climbing up and down the steps all day, to haul groceries, pick up laundry, keep track of the kids and for every little thing, that when we decided to move we only looked for a ranch house. And now, as we get older, I'm glad we did." □

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