

How the Gardens Grew

Strict rules about parking and home improvement are just a few details that set Forest Hills Gardens apart

BY SORAH SHAPIRO

It may be one of the city's best-kept secrets that only 15 minutes from booming Broadway lies a sleepy hollow where little is heard but the song of a bird and the sigh of an aged birch.

Fondly referred to as the "modern Garden of Eden," Forest Hills Gardens is a serene community that has retained its Old World charm in the shadow of New World chic.

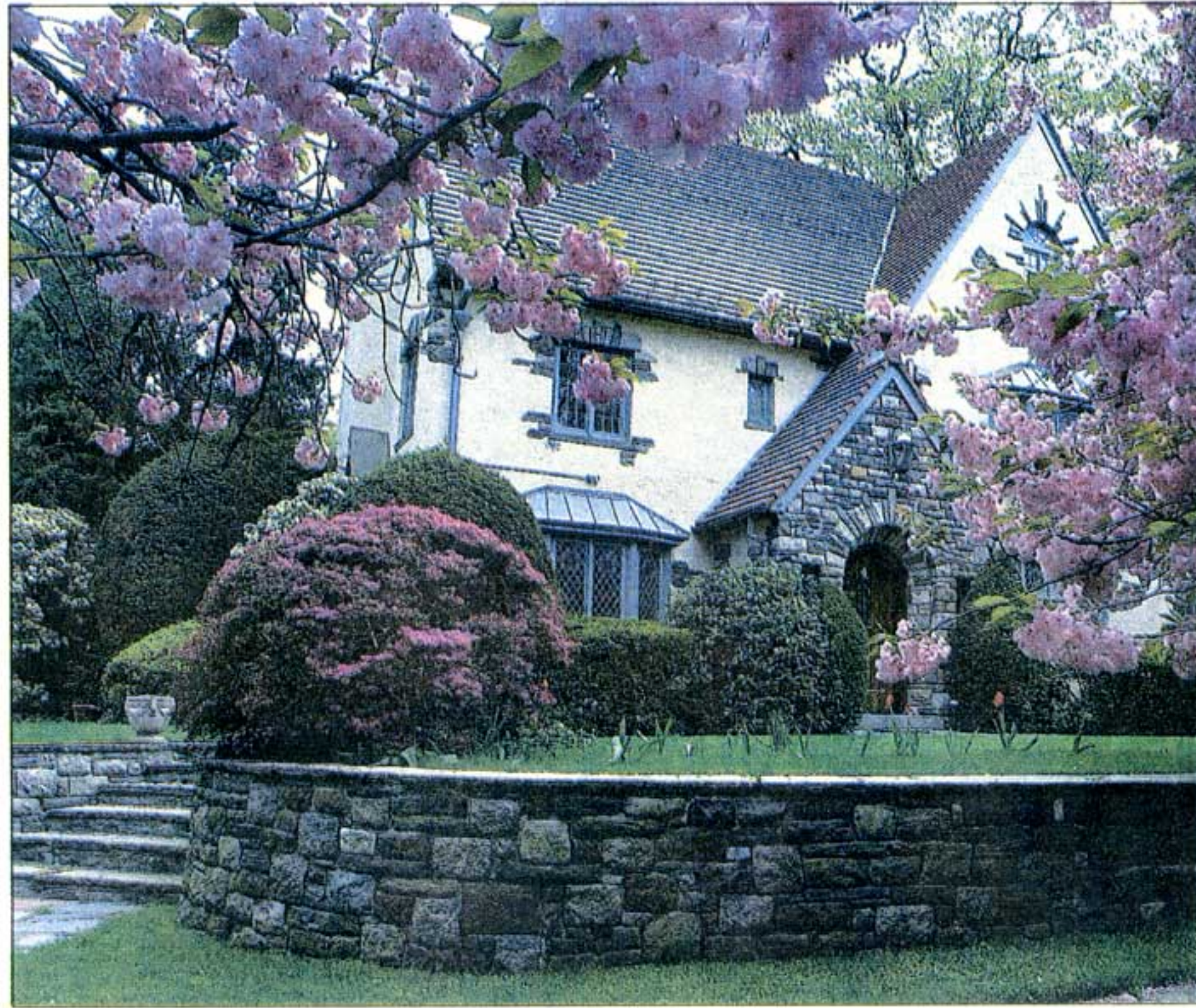
Purchased in 1909 for \$6,000 per acre (well over \$100,000 per acre in today's dollars), the 142-acre tract resembles medieval college towns as well as English and European garden cities. Its entrance square, towers, architecture and lampposts, and its lawns and gardens flowing into public areas, are but a few of the attributes that attest to its abiding antiquity, originality and continuity. (The neighborhood is, in fact, so flush with greenery that one fails to see the forest hills for the trees.)

"Forest Hills Gardens is an extremely rare example of a suburb that's as intact now as when it was built almost a hundred years ago. It hasn't been bulldozed for a bunch of little houses and still remains a thriving, desirable place to live," said Susan Klaus, 57, an independent urban historian in Washington, D.C., and author of "A Modern Arcadia: Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and the Plan for Forest Hills Gardens" (University of Massachusetts Press).

Except for a few stores and professional offices, and its 13,500-seat West Side Tennis Club, which once hosted the U.S. Open, the floral enclave is still as quaint and quiet as it was in its genesis, even though it has grown to include 880 houses and at least 10 apartment buildings. Formerly home to celebrities such as Dale Carnegie and actress Thelma Ritter, and now Geraldine Ferraro, the Gardens is a top choice for prospective homeowners willing to pony up from \$500,000 to \$3 million for a one- or two-family home.

Betty Pretlow Seeler, 75, is a lifelong Gardens resident. "There aren't any other communities like this," she said. "We have the sophistication of the city and the beauty of the country all in one, and we have a cross section of the world." (The population of 6,000 is multi-ethnic and upper-middle class.)

Seeler estimates that her huge house, with its walled garden, drive-



Newsday Photos / Alan Raitz



Distinctive architectural styles of Forest Hills Gardens are represented by homes on Deepdene Road, above, on Greenway North, left, and the former residence of Trygve Lie, the first secretary general of the United Nations, far left.

way and two-car garage, may be worth \$2 million today — a far cry from the \$3,000 to \$8,000 those homes drew in the early 1900s.

Another longtime resident, Floyd Hasselriis, 79, a retired mechanical engineer, said, "We're not accustomed to seeing a community that was deliberately planned to be this beautiful in terms of placement of trees and kinds of trees and winding streets and so forth. The rest of the city, with its rows and rows of almost identical houses and straight streets, just happened. Those weren't deliberately designed like ours was."

Indeed, unlike other early 20th century suburbs that burgeoned along new transportation routes, the Gardens was born of a blueprint of a different color.

"What distinguishes this development from others is the caliber of its creators, the thoroughness of its planning and the quality of its architectural design, materials and workmanship, which are still evident today, almost a century later," Klaus said.

But it is conformity to strict rules (including one that rooftops must be red) that accounts for the Gardens' longevity.

"Forest Hills Gardens is the only neighborhood in Queens that has guidelines as to what one may and may not do to one's property. In other neighborhoods you can paint your house fuchsia if you want to, but you'll never get away with that here," said Susanna Hof, board member of

Friends of Station Square, a community action group based in Forest Hills. "That's one of the reasons our neighborhood has managed to maintain its unique character all these years," she said.

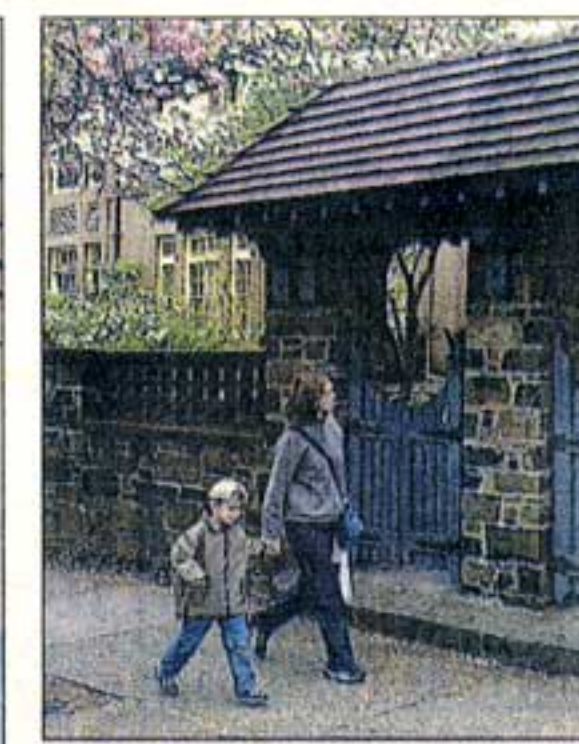
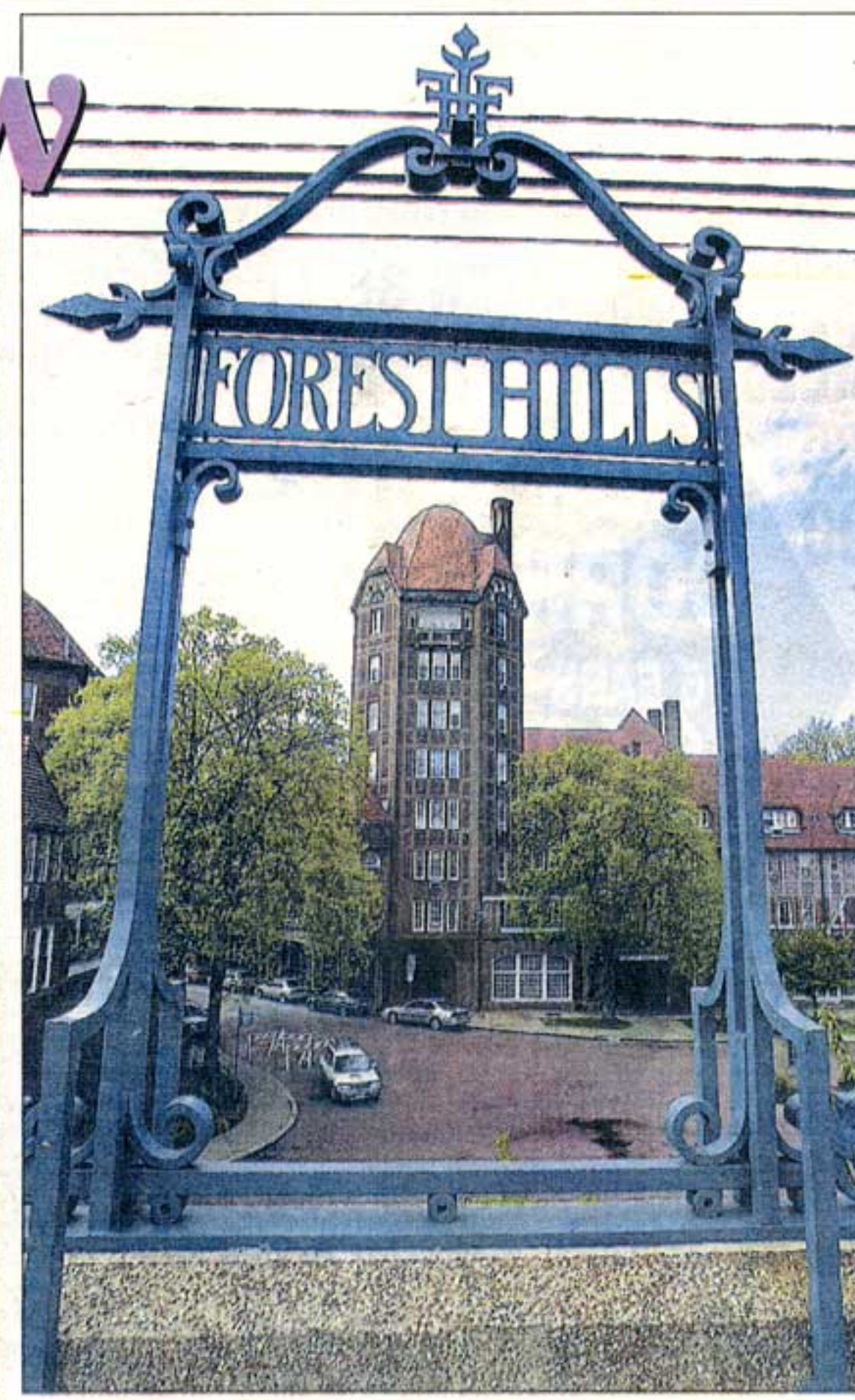
Not only homes but private streets carry constraints. Although traffic is not restricted, street parking is reserved for residents with parking decals. Visitors are required to put a note inside their car window as to whom they're visiting. Failure to comply results in a "boot" and a \$125 fine if the car is not moved within 15 minutes.

These regulations are enforced by the Forest Hills Gardens Corp., a property-owner association that charges per square footage for compulsory member-

ship. The owner of an average-size dwelling pays about \$1,000 a year.

Conceived by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. of Boston (1870-1957), whose father designed Central Park in 1857, the Gardens became the cause celebre of America's planned-community development. By 1910, newspapers and magazines nationwide hailed it as the era's "most notable garden city experiment," one that might be the forerunner of well-laid plans for wider suburban development — in contrast to the let-the-wood-chips-fall-where-they-may malaise that prevailed.

The "experiment" had four objectives: to prove that the "new science of city planning" employed in major cities (now called urban development) could be applied to a suburban setting; to provide an aesthetic alternative to middle- and upper-class commuters eager to escape overcrowded city confines; to demonstrate that high-end design could as easily convert into cash as the houses developers were arbitrarily putting up along peripheral highways; and to perpetuate their work by requiring new homeowners to comply with



The sign atop the Long Island Rail Road station, left, announces the Forest Hills stop. Above, strollers on Greenway Terrace.

newly emerging principles of scientific city planning and carved out an exemplary, enduring infrastructure of paving, sidewalks, streetlights, sewers, electricity, landscapes, a rail station and single-family, semi-detached and group housing.

Their foremost wish was that their work be a model for the rest of the country.

"It is highly unlikely that a commercial developer would have hired Olmsted and Atterbury," Klaus said.

"The Sage Foundation did it because it didn't like the way the speculative developers were laying out suburbs in a monotonous grid system with row upon row of undistinguished, often low-quality houses, with no thought to design or the future."

Olmsted avoided routine and repetitive layout, and created a variety of house sizes with easy road access. "He believed that successful communities depended on good roads and walks, 'pleasant to the eye within themselves and having intervals of pleasant openings and outlooks, with suggestions of refined domestic life,'" said Alex Garvin, professor of urban planning and management at Yale University.

"One wanders along his curving roads, never sure where they will end, constantly surprised and entertained by some aspect of his design. His wide, tree-lined roadways are excellent for FedEx truck deliveries, recyclable garbage pick-ups, school bus-ing and automobile commuting."

That the foundation met and even exceeded its expectations is clearly evident in the words of dean Robert A.M. Stern at Yale University School of Architecture: "Its unique combination of city planning and architecture made Forest Hills Gardens the pre-eminent expression of the suburban ideal and the most important suburb built in New York, the only one to assume international importance."

So vital did author Klaus deem the evolution of the enclave to architectural and social history that she devoted a decade of her life to its research.

"Her efforts will hopefully contribute to a wider understanding of the importance of Forest Hills Gardens in the history of suburban development," said Robin Karson, executive director of the Library of American Landscape History, co-publisher of the book.

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court-enforceable rules and regulations. (Unapproved changes to the facade were forbidden.)

The "Thou Shalt Make No Unauthorized Changes" approach is still applicable today. Promulgated by the Gardens' founder, the Russell Sage Foundation for Social Betterment, the condition is binding upon a buyer, and a breach is a serious offense. Because speculation in real estate by a charitable organization was virtually unheard-of in those days, the foundation wished to assure that its investment be maintained in perpetuity.

The foundation, in fact, had no previous real estate holdings. But bewildered in 1906 by a \$65-million inheritance from her financier husband, one of the country's wealthiest (albeit miserly) men, the 80-year-old Olivia Sage turned for advice to her lawyer and confidant, Robert de Forest (1848-1931). To her relief, the corporate attorney, a prominent member of New York society with an interest in better housing and philanthropy, engineered the establishment of the foundation, the investment of \$6,000 per acre for the 142-acre plot that would become known as Forest Hills Gardens, and the enlistment of a top designer. "I believe there is money in taste," he

was wont to say.

In collaboration with Olmsted and architect Grosvenor Atterbury of New York (1869-1956), who were dedicated to civic improvement and housing reform, the foundation pioneered one of America's first transformations of a barren woodland into a modern, upper-middle class, city-like suburb.

Blazing a trail into the hinterland, the collaborators hewed close to the



Source: Forest Hills Gardens Corp. Newsday / Richard Corbett