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The Grandeur of ‘Gatsby’

Long Island castle inspired setting for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1920s classic

By Leigh Kamping-Carder



From left: Beacon Towers, Gatsby’s home in Baz Luhrmann’s film

From Luxury Listings NYC: Driving through the iron gates of Sands Point, you can imagine Jay Gatsby—in an ever-so-pale pink suit—strolling the grounds of this Long Island enclave, pining for Daisy Buchanan, swathed in milky pearls amidst a gaggle of gin-soaked jazz fiends.

The waterfront site was once the home of Beacon Towers, a 100-room mansion that provided the blueprint for the title character’s home in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.”

Alva Vanderbilt Belmont—suffragette, divorcée, widow and very rich lady—spent well over \$1 million erecting the Walt-Disney-meets-Swiss-cottage castle, only 40 minutes from New York City. Now, all that remains are the interlocking Bs on the gates.

In 1927, Belmont sold the home for \$400,000 to press baron William Randolph Hearst, who promptly razed the structure to build his own lavish home. Shortly after World War II, however, Hearst turned his estate over to the bank for tax reasons. A developer paid \$70,000 for the pleasure of knocking it down, and then built eight houses on the lot, six of which are still standing.

One, at 8 Sands Light, is on the market for a mere \$5.9 million.

The five-bedroom Colonial is outfitted with a vaulted cathedral ceiling, a custom wraparound cedar deck and a two-level walk-in closet that the owners, Amy and Larry Birnbaum, carved out of what was once the attic.

“Truth be told, that closet is twice as big as the bedroom I grew up in,” joked Larry Birnbaum, a native of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

The 30 custom windows overlook 200 feet of deserted beach.

“You feel like you’re in an ocean liner because there’s just a constant horizon of water,” said Maggie Keats, an agent with Douglas Elliman who is listing the home. “It’s the ideal waterfront setting.”

The Birnbaums, who plan to downsize to an apartment in Manhattan, fell in love with the house as newlyweds, and paid \$1.98 million for it in 1992.

“I said, ‘We could look at some other houses,’” Amy Birnbaum recalled, “and he said, ‘No, I know where we’re going to live.’ He really just fell in love with the view.”

That view also entranced director Baz Luhrmann, who visited Sands Point to research his film adaptation of Fitzgerald’s novel.

In the movie, released this spring, Gatsby’s mansion sports the same cluster of turrets, arched windows and cream-colored façade as Beacon Towers.

“I saw the movie twice because I couldn’t believe it,” Larry Birnbaum said.

Peering across the water from his lawn, you have a perfect vantage point for what Fitzgerald called East Egg. And you can almost see the flicker of Gatsby’s green light.

Correction: A previously published version of this article said the owners of 8 Sands Light were Ann and Larry Birnbaum. In fact, they are Amy and Larry Birnbaum.