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When Renderings Clash With Reality

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MONTCLAIR



Dith Pran/The New York Times

Ten homes are under construction on the 2.36 acre site where the Marlboro Inn stood.

AS the first of 10 huge homes being built on the site of the former Marlboro Inn began to rise last fall toward its full height and breadth, so did the hue and cry.

"Montclair monstrosities!" thundered resident critics on a blog called the Montclair Watercooler. "Monster houses," moaned one writer in a letter to The Montclair Times, the weekly newspaper. "Homes on steroids," added a Baristanet blogger, after a look last month at the finished frame of the first 5,000-square-foot house standing cheek by jowl to the emerging frames of three others.

The 2.36-acre Marlboro Inn tract is bordered on three sides by streets — Watchung Avenue, Grove Street and Christopher Street — and the houses, which

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Zampolin & Associates Architects
A rendering suggested the yards would be much bigger.

have no yards to speak of, are a mere six feet from curbside on Watchung. Some are closer than that to a new street cut down the middle of the property going

from Christopher to Grove.

Steven Plofker, the original developer, who has sold the project to American Properties of Iselin, had described the plan as a type of "New Urbanism" in presentations to the local planning and zoning boards. The developer emphasized that front porches would all face the interior street and be set congenially close to one another.

But on Watchung, the backs of four massive houses now under construction, set about 12 feet apart, create a barricade effect in the eyes of many onlookers. The houses tower over the sidewalk, and stand taller than any surrounding homes, several of which were recently placed on the market.

The new houses at the Hempstead at Montclair, as the development is called, are just going on the market now, at a price of \$1.7 million each.

Mayor Ed Remsen, assailed in many blog entries and letters for having supported demolition of the history-laden former inn building last year and for voting to give final approval to the dense residential development, assailed the Hempstead houses himself recently in a Baristanet note: "For the record, I HATE the McMansions."

So, all around town residents are asking how and why the project was approved and if there is a way to stop it from happening again.

The angry bloggers heave their invective in two general directions: at greedy developers and at politicians and appointees they see as too craven to stand up to greedy developers.

But another sort of subdemon has bubbled up from the cauldron of public opinion: the lovely renderings of the buildings that were distributed during the planning stages. They were so pretty they disguised the truth, in the eyes of Kevin Lee Allen, a design consultant, and Mark Porter, the editor of The Montclair Times, among others who have complained in the last couple of months.

Mr. Porter wrote an editorial in February calling the architectural renderings of the Hempstead produced by the firm of Zampolin & Associates of Westwood, "fantasies that could not possibly exist in 2005."

"The illustrations display houses on wooded tracts with bucolic layers of trees vanishing to the horizon," the editorial observed. "Some overhanging branches appear subtropical. Despite the

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existing houses built on Christopher and Grove Streets, the renderings show no other nearby abodes." Zampolin did not respond to phone messages seeking comment.

Mr. Allen, meanwhile, did a "reverse perspective" analysis of the site plan drawings, posting on Baristanet his conclusion that the drawings implied homes about half as big as those being built. Mr. Plofker himself noted when he appeared before the planning board that the existing zoning allowed as many as 12 houses to be built on the site, although they would have had to be smaller in size.

Mr. Allen noted that the drawings submitted for the 10-home plan were "pictures," not the technical drawings that developers are also required to submit to planners.

But reading technical drawings takes some skill, Mr. Allen observed. Michael Gorman, the director of project development for NK Architects of Morristown and also the chairman of the planning board in Millburn, said the responsibility for acquiring that skill rests with planning board members.

"The issue in Montclair, or anywhere else," Mr. Gorman said, "is whether the planning board members asked the right questions. If they did not, then shame on them."

A new state law was recently passed, Mr. Gorman said, that requires all members of planning boards to pass a basic skills test within 18 months of being named. The Department of Community Affairs is currently developing the test and a course of instruction.

There are no laws covering artful illusion, of course.

The Montclair Times editorial called for planners to come up with new regulations requiring developers of significantly sized projects to provide "proof" of what their projects will look like in context, suggesting that three-dimensional scale models including adjacent structures, open areas and roadways would be most appropriate.

But several planners and developers more or less shrugged — or laughed — when asked about how to ensure that what is rendered is built.

"Look at this!" Wasseem Boraie of Boraie Development fairly crowed, showing off a scale model of the 125-unit condo building his family's company has just completed in downtown New Brunswick. "Look at the model, and look out the window at the building. They're the same, right? How often do you see that? Almost never." As for the reason, Mr. Boraie said it comes down to builders' desire to cut costs.

Paul Sionas, an architect who has worked with Mr. Plofker on past projects in Montclair, said architects often lose control of the finished product. "Probably 90 percent of what we design winds up


not looking like what we drew," he said.

The reasons for that , according to Mr. Sionas, "range from 'real budget constraints,' to 'perceived budget constraints,' a contractor knowing better, a developer knowing better." He said, "It's pretty upsetting."



Meanwhile, members of the Montclair boards are not laying claim to having been duped by drawings. Mostly, they have remained silent on the issue of the Hempstead at Montclair. But one, the town planner, Karen Kadus, a municipal employee who also sits on the planning board, said she has observed both agencies becoming more diligent about determining how closely builders intend to hew to plans they present, and more insistent about getting "realistic depictions" of how a proposed structure would fit into the general environment at a site.

"The Hempstead developer took the buildings to the legal maximum size," Ms. Kadus said. "It's entirely legal, but it is kind of shocking to see what the maximum looks like."

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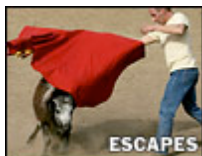
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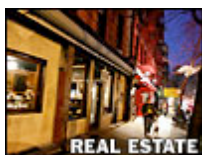
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