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Garden apartments help shape the N.J. landscape



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Kristin Lee and her 4-year-old son, Braiden, enjoying the lawn at Nottingham Manor in Montvale.

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In North Jersey, garden apartment buildings are a little like pizzerias — there's at least one in every town.

These two-story rectangles, usually faced with brick and set on grassy lawns, date to a post-World War II suburban building boom that also gave rise to strip malls and modest single-family subdivisions across the region.

And like other suburban building types, garden apartments aren't on anybody's list of design stars.

"They're nondescript architecturally," said architect Barry Poskanzer of Poskanzer Skott in Ridgewood. "I've never driven by one and thought, 'That's an interesting design.'"

"Monotonous," said James Hughes, a Rutgers economist who has studied the history of New Jersey's apartment markets.

Still, garden apartments have their place in the housing ecosystem. They're a relatively affordable choice for many people just starting out, or those who can't or don't want to buy a home. And then there's the green space that puts the "garden" in their name.

Kirstin Lee and her husband, Bernard, have lived at Nottingham Manor, a Montvale garden complex, for a decade. They like the convenience of being able to call the superintendent for repairs and park near their apartment. Even more, they love having a place for their son to play outside and ride his tricycle — not always easy to find in a rental.

"The grounds are beautiful," said Kirstin Lee, a 39-year-old teacher.

Their neighbor, Patricia Geipel, 80, has lived at the complex for 19 years. A retired billing clerk, she gets her exercise by walking for half an hour each day around the complex. When her grandchildren visit, they play on the grounds.

"We have a big lawn out there and it's really nice," she said.

William Martin, a Westwood architect, said that the green space is one of the best features that garden apartments bring to the North Jersey landscape.

"If you look at complexes constructed in the '50s and '60s, they have mature trees, nice pathways, sometimes open space," said Martin, co-chairman of the public awareness committee of the New Jersey chapter of the American Institute of Architects. "I think they're a tremendous asset. They provide an alternative way to live in suburban New Jersey that isn't a single-family home."

Garden apartments, he said, help diversify a town's demographics, allowing people to stay in the same town over their life cycles because they offer shelter for young people just starting out, as well as for older people looking to downsize. A garden apartment is often the first "adult" home for people in their twenties.

Martin offers his own experience as an example. His first place in Westwood was in a garden apartment; he and his wife were able to stay in town when they later traded up to a two-family house, and then a single-family.

"Communities that have housing at all income levels have long-term stability," he said.

And where others see dull design, Martin sees an "appealing understatement."

"They're not meant to be ostentatious," Martin said. "They're meant to provide a safe and healthy environment for people who choose apartment living."

Over the years they've often been marketed as "luxury," but compared to newer rentals, they're fairly modest in terms of both size and amenities.

"You have a kind of community, you have a front door, you can drive up to your apartment. It doesn't feel as urbanized," said Ryan Sanzari, chief operating officer of Hackensack-based Alfred Sanzari Enterprises, which owns about 500 units in half a dozen garden complexes. Most were built by his grandfather, Alfred Sanzari, half a century ago.

Investors like them, too. Tom McConnell of Redwood Realty Advisors in Hasbrouck Heights has sold a number of North Jersey garden complexes. Investors who buy these buildings, he said, will pay roughly \$125,000 to \$225,000 per apartment in suburban towns, depending on the town.

"There's a lot more demand than there is supply," McConnell said. Investors like the steady income they can get out of the buildings, which have monthly rents that typically range from around \$1,200 to \$1,700 for a one-bedroom in North Jersey.

Apartments are especially attractive investments in comparison to some other real estate types, including offices, which have high vacancy rates in North Jersey.

Apartment vacancy rates are under 3 percent in both Bergen and Passaic counties, according to Reis Inc., a New York-based real estate research firm – which means it's easy to find tenants for garden complexes.

"If you maintain them, there's always going to be a market," Sanzari said.

The heyday of garden apartment construction came in the 1950s and 1960s, part of the suburban building boom that followed World War II. Between the Depression and the war, there was a 15-year home-building drought, leaving an acute demand for housing that working people could afford.

"How do you economically meet that demand?" Martin asked.

Garden apartments were one answer, because they were relatively fast and easy to build, with wood frames and no need for concrete, steel or elevators. So a single-family builder without the expertise to construct a high-rise could easily diversify into garden apartments.

And they were a way to "create increased density in the suburbs," according to Poskanzer, since more density generally means more profits for a builder.

Garden apartments make up a major part of the apartment market in New Jersey. About half the apartment units in the state were built from 1940 to 1979 — a period that includes the garden-apartment boom, according to a Rutgers report written by Hughes and a former colleague, Joseph Seneca.

The roots of the garden apartment style stretch back to the early part of the 20th century, to the City Beautiful movement in the U.S. and the Garden City movement in Europe. These crusades looked for ways to improve the quality of life in crowded cities.

That movement was one of the inspirations for the Radburn planned development in Fair Lawn, which includes wide swaths of parkland and a mix of single-family homes and garden apartments.

But most garden apartments are not as seamlessly tied into the community as at Radburn, an artful mix of single-family homes, apartments, stores and parkland. Many garden complexes are more isolated, reflecting postwar suburban development patterns that revolve around driving rather than walking.

These days, planners prefer walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods that allow people to easily stroll from home to stores and restaurants.

"Most suburban apartment zones are currently extremely hostile to pedestrian use," wrote Paul Mitchell Hess, a University of Toronto professor, in a paper, "Rediscovering the Logic of Garden Apartments."

He called for more efforts to transform "suburban apartment clusters into suburban neighborhoods" by adding sidewalks and streets to better integrate complexes into the surrounding environment.

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