

NY Times, July 9, 2008: **Letter: Tearing Up Queens**

To the Editor:

Re “Questions of Taste in Queens” (news article, July 5):
So much for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s much-ballyhooed efforts to preserve lower-density neighborhoods in the boroughs outside Manhattan.

Queens’s residential neighborhoods are still caught up in a building boom whose major accomplishment seems to be tearing down older homes and replacing them with the behemoths described in your article.

While the new houses may be legal, paving over every square inch of open space and walling in the product to create a fortress is not.

Residents of these neighborhoods have been fighting for a minor change in a zoning resolution that would save these graceful older neighborhoods — but the Department of City Planning has been too busy accommodating developers whose plans are closer to the mayor’s vision of an ever-growing city than the aspirations of longtime homeowners in Queens.

Patricia Dolan, Pres., Kew Gardens Hills Civic Assoc.

Flushing, Queens, July 6, 2008. View it on line at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/opinion/1web09queens.html?ex=1216267200&en=15069fef2d68fae5&ei=5070&emc=eta1>

An added note from Zoning and Code Enforcement co-chair Joseph Amoroso:

The Department of Buildings enforces our zoning laws and building code. Review the zoning in this Forest Hills neighborhood noted below and find predominantly R1-2 zoning. The new side yard amendment certainly applies to all R1 through R5 zones and violations should be reported enforced by DOB.

Read the New York Times story on the next page or view the link below:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/05/nyregion/05forest.html?scp=1&sq=Questions+of+Taste+in+Queens+&st=nyt>

Questions of Size and Taste for Queens Houses

By [KIRK SEMPLE](#)

To the Bukharian Jews of Central Asia, a big house is an essential tradition: a place to shelter multiple generations, to hold large parties, memorials and holiday dinners, to reaffirm a community's unity.

So wherever they have put down roots, Bukharians — or, as they are sometimes called, Bukharans — have built aggressively, including in central Queens, where tens of thousands have settled since the early 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nowhere has their love of big homes been on more opulent display than in a section of Forest Hills known as Cord Meyer, an upper middle class neighborhood long cherished by its residents for its tranquillity and architectural charm.

There, Bukharians have been tearing down the neighborhood's sedate Tudor, Georgian and Cape Cod-style homes, paving over lawns and erecting white-brick edifices that borrow from old Europe, with sweeping balustrades, stone lions bracketing regal double doorways, chateau-style dormers and pitched roofs, Romanesque and Greek columns and ornate wrought-iron balconies accented with gold leaf that glints in the sun.

But while the Bukharians' arrival has been a boon for the area's residential construction industry, it has been a bane for some neighbors. These residents have complained about the Bukharian tendency to build boldly and big, saying that the new houses are destroying their neighborhoods.

"There is a lot of history in the Cord Meyer area and a lot of historical houses that have a specific aesthetic character in that community," said [Melinda R. Katz](#), a city councilwoman whose district includes Forest Hills. "A lot of the houses that are going up there are just simply too big relative to the other houses that are there and have been there for generations. They are out of character."

The Bukharians contend that they are being misunderstood.

Indeed, what might seem on its surface like a parochial neighborhood quarrel over yards, fences and taste has revealed the complex civil society of a tight-knit immigrant community and the cultural tensions that have resulted from its rapid growth.

"Don't be upset with our people because we like to be large," pleaded Boris Kandov, president of the Bukharian Jewish Congress of the U.S.A. and Canada, an umbrella group for Bukharian associations.

"Let me tell you something," he continued in halting English. "In Queens, most of the houses is old. New people build a new city. It's good for community."

More than 30,000 Bukharian Jews have settled in central Queens, mainly in Forest Hills, Rego Park, Kew Gardens Hills and Fresh Meadows. They now occupy sections of the commercial strips along 108th Street in Forest Hills, operate dozens of places of worship and yeshivas, run a weekly newspaper and prosper in a wide range of fields including jewelry, medicine and real estate.

Critics of the new Bukharian architecture in Queens, many of whom are Jewish as well, have presented their complaints in private conversations with elected officials, at small civic meetings and on blogs. Some have taken the view that the Bukharian community is highly insular and that the Bukharians' tendency to build different from the rest of the neighborhood reflects that.

"I could spit and throw up," said a Forest Hills resident of 51 years as she stood with her husband outside a big house under construction at 112th Street and 68th Avenue. The woman, who like other opponents interviewed for this story spoke only on condition of anonymity, admitted that she had never spoken with any of the Bukharian newcomers.

"They don't want to talk to us," she said. "They want to be alone."

Councilwoman Katz said that while the Bukharian homes in her district have complied with the city's building and zoning regulations, she, too, was concerned about their size and the loss of green space, particularly in the Cord Meyer area between 108th Street and the Grand Central Parkway, where nearly every block has at least one newly completed house and another one under construction.

Ms. Katz, who is chairwoman of the Council's Land Use Committee, has been working with the City Planning Department on new zoning regulations that would limit the size of new houses in Cord Meyer and other architecturally sensitive areas and create what she calls "a more stable community."

The Bukharians have made their architectural mark elsewhere in Queens, albeit not as ostentatiously as in Forest Hills. In the middle class neighborhoods of Kew Gardens Hills and Fresh Meadows, for instance, they have not so much been tearing down the signature brick row houses as adding extensions, paving over yards and erecting walls around their properties.

"We like to utilize every single square inch of land, every inch of territory," explained Rabbi Shlomo Nisanov, head of a Bukharian synagogue and community center in Kew Gardens Hills. "For some reason, people don't appreciate it."

One afternoon late last week, Mr. Nisanov, a blocky man who was born in Uzbekistan and emigrated to Kew Gardens Hills when he was a child, took a stroll through his neighborhood and delivered something of a short course in Bukharian immigrant culture.

He showed how in the space of a decade, Bukharians, mainly from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, had come to dominate some residential blocks, as relatives bought homes within walking distance of one another and some extended families crowded under one roof. Their houses were easy to identify by their bricked front patios and front walls.

"What makes Bukharian Jews unique is they love to stay together," he said.

The Bukharian tendency to pave over everything is practical, he continued. Bukharians preferred a terrace or patio to a lawn, which he called “useless land.” A yard required mowing — “a waste of time,” he said.

“Exhibit A,” he said, gesturing to a brick row house on 76th Road. It had a verdant front yard that seemed to beg for mowing and pruning. “You see this?” he said dismissively. “What is this? What are we seeing here?”

He then pointed to the house next door. “Exhibit B,” he declared. The house was fronted by a well-swept terrace of red and black paving stones and enclosed within a five-foot-high wall that, he said, ensured some privacy. Any remaining green was an accent rather than a feature.

“You can eat outside, the kids have a place to play,” the rabbi said. “You have usage of the front of your house.”

“It’s nice, it’s beautiful,” he added. “What are you afraid of?”

Mr. Kandov, who immigrated to the United States from Uzbekistan in 1987 and runs a limousine fleet and other family-owned businesses, said the largeness of the Bukharian home in Queens was an expression of freedom after years of oppression in the Soviet Union.

“Why are we in America?” he said while sitting in his office in his group’s headquarters, a five-story, 43,000-square-foot building in the main commercial district of Forest Hills. “Because we’re dreaming of this freedom! We were dreaming to build big house.”

On the walls hung two enormous paintings in thick gold-colored frames, one showing the British surrender to Washington at Yorktown and the other depicting Moses’ liberation of the Jews in Egypt.

“It’s not to show that we’re rich,” he insisted. “I’m feeling this. Bukharian Jews feel O.K., it’s good, thanks God.”

Alexander Yakubov, a Bukharian real estate agent in Forest Hills, said his decision to partially demolish an old house in Forest Hills to make way for a larger one had nothing to do with grandiose notions of spiritual expression and everything to do with the economy of home ownership.

The house was old, he said, and it would have cost more to renovate and expand than to knock down and build new. “Anybody would love to save money and move into a ready house,” he said.

The most ostentatious Bukharian construction has given Rabbi Itzhak Yehoshua, the chief rabbi of the Bukharian Jews in the United States, some pause. He said he urged modesty among his congregation in order to avoid tensions in the community, but he has met resistance.

“I tell them all the time that our ancestors taught us about being humble,” he said during an interview in his small office in the Bukharian Congress building in Forest Hills. “They say, ‘Rabbi, this is our home for entertainment, it’s our fortress. Now we work’ — and they work very hard — ‘and this is our understanding of America.’”

He went on: “I am very happy and proud that my congregation interprets freedom to be successful and to work honestly and to settle and to help the community. And each house is another stone to help create the Jewish community.”

Worried about the widening divide between the Bukharian and non-Bukharian communities in central Queens, Cynthia Zalisky, executive director of the Queens Jewish Community Council, a social services agency for immigrants, said she has been trying to soften the discussion about the Bukharian homes.

“It’s a very delicate situation,” she admitted. Property owners are entitled to their design decisions within the law, she said, but she is also trying to encourage the Bukharian immigrants to view themselves as “part of a whole, not just an entity unto themselves.”

“We’re trying to see whether there’s some compromise here,” she went on. “We got to put our heads together like the [United Nations](#).”