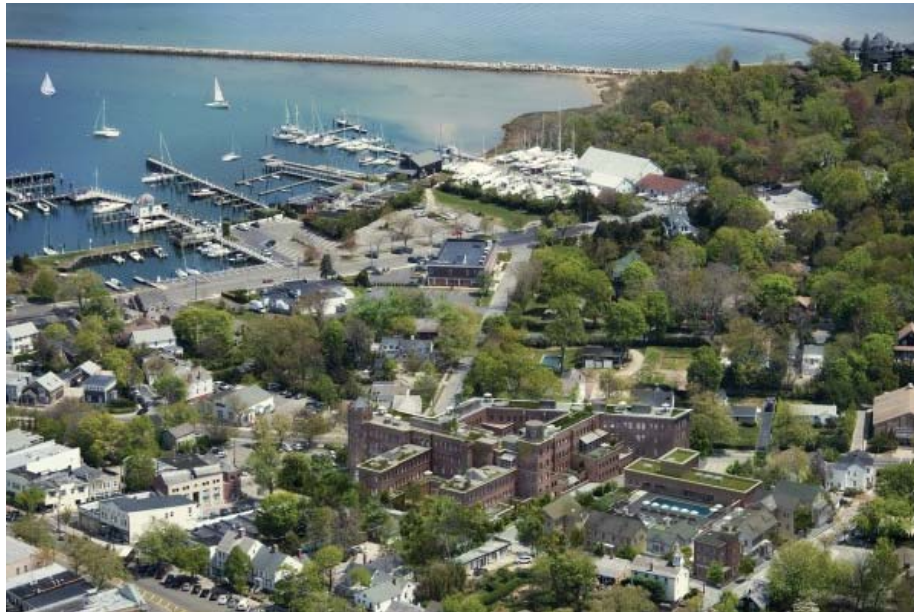


SoHo Meets The Hamptons: Will Factory Loft Living Urbanize Sag Harbor?



Rendering of completed Watchcase development

Like its cufflinks, cut crystal chalices, and acute alcoholism, the Hamptons' architecture is quite often inherited. Such is the case with the historic Watchcase factory in Sag Harbor—but rather than taking the form of a nearly Mayflower-era beach bungalow, this previously deserted piece of industrial infrastructure is being revamped as loft-style condominiums. Maintaining its timepiece namesake, Watchcase presents a new urbanized proposition to the sleepy-chic streets on Long Island's East End. In a village where a driftwood tchoctke atelier rubs elbows with a Donna Karan concept boutique, Beyer Blinder Belle Architects (of Grand Central Terminal and Brooklyn Navy Yard renovation acclaim) has brought a bit of street to the beach. Grey Gardens, meet city mouse.



Aerial rendering of Watchcase

“Urbanistically, it’s a sensation,” architect Jack Beyer tells Architizer. Once deemed an abandoned nuisance by locals, the new development will infuse a fresh populous of urbanite loft dwellers, while eschewing restrictive gates that classify so many upscale communities. “For decades, it was an empty eyesore. From being a blight on the community, this building will now contribute energy, income, people’s spending power, and an aesthetic that was never here before,” says Beyer.



Model kitchen at Watchcase

The aesthetic appeal of industrial architecture translated to luxury lifestyle that has crystalized in SoHo since the 1970s reaches new heights at Watchcase, where original ornamentation is being replicated, and the former water tower is being restored as an outdoor gazebo with 360-degree views of the village (below).



The warehouse-like windows of the cast iron facades in Lower Manhattan here take the form of hypnotizing rows of perfectly spaced arched windows. Those windows may be attributed to the building's historic function, in which each window cast light on an individual watchcase maker's desk. To accommodate this use, the windows were placed abnormally high on the wall to emphasize functionality over seaside views.

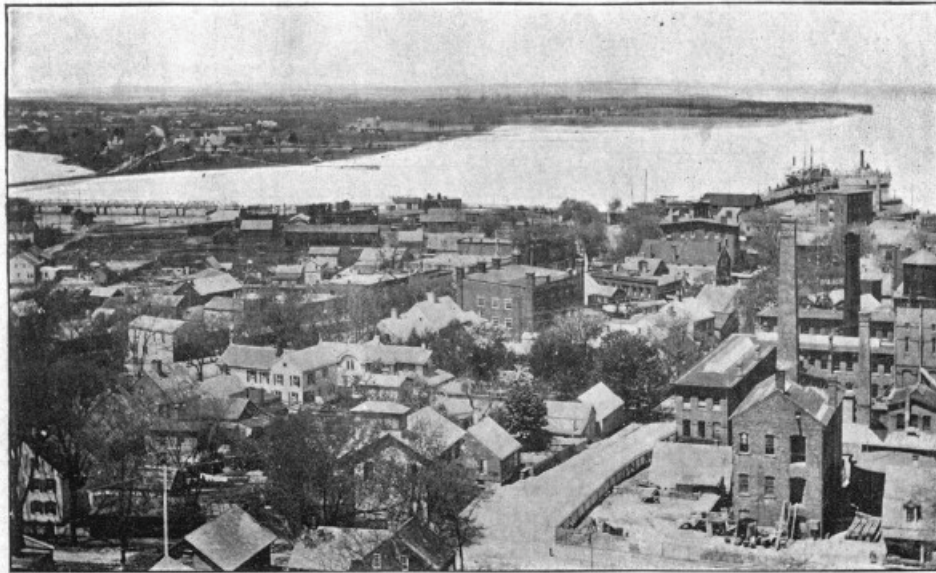


Beyer Blinder Belle resolved the distorted high window placement by raising the floors, which also offered the opportunity to place air vents and wiring underneath below. Gone are the exposed pipes and HVAC vents that define SoHo lofts; instead, there's open space that gives justice to the original old-growth southern yellow pine ceiling beams. To clean the musty walls, thousands of walnut shells were pelleted against the century-old bricks.



*Above: Historic photograph of the Joseph Fahys & Co. watchcase factory.
Courtesy of John Jermain Library, Sag Harbor.*

Beyer attests that the associated prosperity of the factory as well as the legacy of the whaling industry made Sag Harbor's economy among the most important in 19th-century America, rivaling that of New York City. Now, a new wave of wealth will manifest in some very non-industrial amenities, like a year-round heated outdoor pool, private spa treatment center, yoga studio, and wine bar in a former precious metals vault. Still, the architects added no additional ornamentation to the bare arched windows, and maintained the original fenestration. "Architecturally, ensuring that the factory read as an industrial structure, was crucial—not trying to pretty it up, not trying to make it into something more fancy," says Beyer.



O. E. H.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW, 1906

Above: Historic photograph taken from the Joseph Fahys & Co. watchcase factory. Courtesy of John Jermain Library, Sag Harbor.

The complex will open for new residents next summer, and until then, many questions are looming: Will the properties be seen as a smart investment for foreign buyers and remain vacant much of the year, or offer an opportunity for mixing new age groups and income brackets? Will current Sag Harbor residents embrace Watchcase as a welcome revitalization or resist the project's large scale? It's unlikely that this 19th-century renovation will set a precedent for the Manhattanization of the East Egg set due to the industrial site's singularity, the Hamptons' comparative height restrictions on new construction, and inherent preservationist bent. For now, we'll be watching Sag Harbor's metropolitan maritime wave come ashore.



by Steven Thomson