

THE ISLAND

Robin Finn

From Monstrosity to Teardown

IT is high time, arguably, for an unsolicited eulogy for Dragon's Gate, the oversize oceanfront mansion that, for the last quarter-century, has gained renown around Southampton, according to the village's historic preservation consultant, Zachary N. Studenroth, as "the house we love to hate." That's the closest he gets to a compliment, unless describing the place as a chateau on steroids counts as complimentary.

It is also the garish gargoyle of a house, quite the exhibitionist, some of us love to gawk at, though not for much longer: Evidently its current owner, the minimalist fashion designer Calvin Klein, has had his fill of the hating and gawking. His solution? Make the house disappear.

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On Monday night, the village's historic preservation and architectural review board signed off — with Mr. Studenroth's blessing — on what amounts to a dual death warrant for Dragon's Gate: a certificate of appropriateness for its demolition and full approval of the three-sectioned Modernist structure that will take its place. But Dragon's Gate is irreplaceable.

"You could even make the case that it is not universally accepted that this thing is a monstrosity," said Mr. Studenroth, who is not a member of that universe. Since it has been deemed to have no external architectural significance, Dragon's Gate is a goner. "It's the last chapter in a very strange story."

The big lug hunkers atop the dune it is supposed to share with its plus-size Meadow Lane neighbors, monopolizing it like a road hog, impervious to the scythe of the January wind, its 50-foot

turret and jutting chimneys poking holes in the horizon. It is tantalizingly visually accessible; it would take a sequoia forest to landscape this seaside Camelot for privacy.

Like any iconic local eyesore, it will be missed. Or maybe not. Monstrosity does seem to be the buzzword that architecturally enlightened folks opt for when describing Dragon's Gate, which occupies a historic district yet apparently retains no relevant historic value.

But don't blame the house; cite human intervention. It was an unobjectionable, patrician Georgian colonial that Henry Francis du Pont built in 1926, named Chestertown House and filled with 18th-century artifacts he later moved to his Delaware estate, Wintertur.

The Chestertown aesthetic died with
Continued on Page 2

In a Monstrosity's Future: Teardown

From Page 1

Mr. du Pont in 1969. In 1970, Andy Warhol's protégée Baby Jane Holzer bought the house but promptly defaulted on the mortgage. Chestertown was sold at auction, paving the way for its transformation by the financier and tax scofflaw Barry Trupin, who did his gutting before Southampton's adoption of a clear code of rules and regulations for its historic district. Architectural excess, not integrity, seemed the blueprint for Dragon's Gate.

The tacky fortress was most recently known as the former Worldcom director Francesco Galesi's Elysium and more famously known as Mr. Trupin's Dragon's Gate. Presumably Mr. Klein did not lay eyes on the house and decide it so offended his aesthetic sensibilities that he had to spend \$30 million to buy and bulldoze it (he did not respond to requests for comment). He doesn't seem the violent type.

Mr. Klein, whose design aesthetic, if not his financial portfolio, tends to lean in the direction of understated, may have fallen so in love with the property, a seven-acre plot on the ocean, that he convinced himself that he could rehabilitate the bloated domicile it contained. Learn to love it, perhaps. In 2003, he bought the



DOUG KUNTZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SIGN-OFF Dragon's Gate, the oceanfront property of the fashion designer Calvin Klein that he has gotten permission to raze.

land as well as, sigh, the shambling 38,000-square-foot Norman-esque castle that did not so much grace as deface it — a place so humongous that Mr. Trupin's trove of medieval armor, a shark tank and a 16th-century Norman pub imported from France inhabited it without fear of, uh, commingling. Or clashing.

But ultimately it seems that Dragon's Gate, the culmination of Mr. Trupin's gainfully and unsanctioned — regarding building permits — annihilation and renovation of Chestertown in the 1980s was worth more to Mr. Klein demolished than intact.

An East Hampton architect

with a knack for maximizing vistas, Michael Haverland, was retained to raze and repurpose the premises — he trimmed the square footage of the proposed new house, but not the footprint, by half.

Not everyone applauded the radical update. The new, glassy Klein residence, whose blueprints had been wending their way through the architectural review and zoning boards like a hot potato all winter, was denigrated in a letter to the board by a Meadow Lane neighbor, William J. Williams Jr., as resembling a hospital clinic or Florida office building. If Mr. Williams is no stickler

for Modernism, that heliport down the lane must really burn him up.

He even had harsh words for the color scheme: in-your-face white. As if Mr. Klein would be so gauche as to make a major palette error. The neighbors have since been assured that the new structure will take its hue cues from beach sand, its roof will be greenish, and it will "harmonize" with its surroundings in a way Dragon's Gate never has.

Mr. Studenroth, who is also the director of the Sag Harbor Whaling and History Museum, was brought in to advise the village's architectural review board, none of them architects, on the home's historic value. On the exterior, at least, he could not prove there was any; the board has no jurisdiction over interiors.

One last thing. The issue of whether, in this dire economic landscape, it is unseemly to grant a homeowner permission for a grand-scale knockdown like this was not, Mr. Studenroth said, something he or the board lost any sleep over.

"The reason no one ever asked Mr. Klein why he would spend \$30 million for the house and then raze it," Mr. Studenroth said, "is that the answer is simple. Because he can."

Yes he can.