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A portrait of architecture, development and the landscape of the East End

By Dawn Watson



It's unusual when a coffee-table book carries a serious statement alongside its pretty pictures, but the newest collaboration between Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Paul Goldberger and acclaimed photographer Jake Rajs attempts to do just that.

"Beyond the Dunes: A Portrait of the Hamptons" contains scenic photos of the East End, but it also holds what Mr. Goldberger and Mr. Rajs call "a deeper message" about the future of the South Fork. The collaborators came together at an authors roundtable dinner, hosted by East End Books at Alison Restaurant in East Hampton, last Thursday to discuss the book.

During the informal discussion with approximately 25 participants, Mr. Goldberger said that he and

Mr. Rajs set out to create something different than "just another book about the Hamptons with pictures of people lounging by the pool or at the latest party," he said with a laugh. "The world didn't need another one of those books."

Mr. Goldberger, a part-time East Hampton resident for the last 25 years said that his essay, which begins the book, is a reminder that the beauty of the South Fork is fragile and in need of constant attention and care. He said that the combination of Mr. Rajs's "too perfect and too beautiful" photographs and his "bit more downbeat and skeptical" prose drives the point home that East Enders need to fight to keep their environment as pristine as possible.

"The book is intended to entice readers with the beauty of the South Fork, but also to challenge them to be realistic about the challenges we face right now," he said.

In "Beyond the Dunes," Mr. Goldberger wrote that East Enders need to be vigilant in protecting the area, which is in danger of losing its charm and local year-round inhabitants.

"...To make the situation more troubling still, the solution to one of the South Fork's problems, overdevelopment, accentuates the other urgent problem, which is the lack of affordable housing. The more land we preserve and the less we build, the more expensive things get and the more the place becomes an enclave of the rich," he wrote.

On Thursday night, Mr. Goldberger said that today's affluent consumer lifestyle is partly to blame for the overdevelopment of the South Fork. But he also credited local conservation efforts for keeping overdevelopment in check.

"Modesty and common sense are vanishing ... people seem to think they couldn't possibly live in a home less than 15,000 square feet now," he said of the "McMansion" trend. "But at least we don't have hi-rise condos on

the beach like they do at the shore in Jersey.”

Environmental preservation and land conservation were also key topics for Mr. Rajs during his Thursday night talk. “This is one of the most beautiful places on earth that I’ve been to,” the Southold-based photographer said. “I wanted to tell in my story through pictures, that it’s important that we preserve this incredible beauty.”

While both men agree that “Beyond the Dunes” is a balance between Mr. Rajs’s painterly landscapes and Mr. Goldberger’s sometimes dire text, Mr. Rajs explained that though he and his collaborator differ in how they communicate, the message is the same. “We’re on the same page and our work is complimentary and consistent in its message,” he said. “Paul’s writing and the pictures work together very well.”

Mr. Rajs joked that his collaboration with Mr. Goldberger was similar to that of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards putting together songs for an album.

“He’s Mick, I’m Keith and we worked from different places and sent things back and forth but the finished product flows together,” he said.

Mr. Goldberger’s essay in the book also covers some ground about the history of the architecture of the East End as well as drawing comparisons to other affluent resort communities.

“These places all have the same problems of too much prosperity,” he said on Thursday night. “It’s what 99 percent of the world would kill to have, but it is a problem that affects overdevelopment and affordability.”

He discussed how overdevelopment has also contributed to the homogenization of the Hamptons.

“It’s ironic that these beautiful original shingle houses are so admired that they’ve now all been knocked off 100 times each,” he said. He added that the bastardization of the original architecture has been taken to extremes in the last several years, with homes getting bigger than ever and closer to the water than were intended by early South Fork inhabitants.

Specifically crediting organizations such as The Group for the East End, The Peconic Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy, Mr. Goldberger said that much has been done to protect the East End. “It’s actually a miracle that it is as unspoiled as it is ... an extraordinary amount of land has been preserved.”

Mr. Rajs said he was hopeful about the future of the East End. He said that although development is inevitable, there is a silver lining. “If you look at the pictures, you can see that there’s still enough left to save here,” he said.

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