

### What Every Long Islander Should Know: “Long Island Renaissance”

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

Shabby. Seedy. A blight on the landscape. Pick your pejorative, and it fits the Patchogue Theater as it stood in 1997.

Once, it had been a resplendent picture palace. But then, once Patchogue was a bustling town, a thriving center of commerce. Now all along Main Street the closed storefronts wore the blank face of failure.

The Patchogue Theater told the story not of one failed town, but many, scattered from one end of the Island to the other. (Many had their own forlorn, hulking theaters.) It is the story of postwar suburbia: of sprawling neighborhoods and huge shopping malls linked by highways, creating retail behemoths with which downtown stores could not compete. A sad tale of slow death.

But in 1997 the story took a new turn, when the Patchogue mayor and village board rode to the theater’s rescue. With financial support from local business people, the Village bought the theater, and found grant money to begin restoring it.

The theater reopened as the Patchogue Theater for the Performing Arts. Restaurants opened to serve the theatergoers. Shops followed.

Village leaders understood what it takes to make a town thrive: people. Visitors make a good start, but towns need residents.

Focusing on affordable housing, the village went to work with Suffolk County and the Long Island Housing Partnership, replacing five acres of rundown properties near the Long Island Railroad station with a new mixed-income, two-bedroom townhouse development. Copper Beech Village provides 80 units for first-time homebuyers—half at market prices and half with partial subsidies.

When people come, prosperity follows, as new enterprises open to serve residents’ needs. These new amenities in turn attract more people, transforming the cycle of failure into a cycle of success. We’ve seen such renaissance in Long Beach, Huntington, Greenport, and elsewhere.

Other Long Island villages, still languishing, would do well to consider Patchogue’s example.

Multi-unit housing is an excellent place to start. Suburbanites today are no longer wedded to the single-family house. While 80% of our housing stock (and 80% of current development) is single-family, more than one-third of Long Islanders would prefer townhouses, condos, or apartments. It’s not only young folks just starting out; half of our seniors would prefer such housing, and almost 40% of empty-nesters. The message for towns and villages: “If you build it, they will come.”

Patchogue’s example also shows the value of collaboration. The problems of local villages have regional roots—and regional solutions. The Copper Beech development brought together village, county, and the not-for-profit community in common cause. Today the Village is working with Artspace, a nationwide not-for-profit developer, on plans to create living and work space for artists.

As for the Patchogue Theater, restored to its Art Deco splendor, it stands today as a monument to innovation. Owned by the Village, managed on a not-for-profit basis by a volunteer board of directors, it offers an almost dizzying diversity of art and entertainment.

It remains a symbol for all of Long Island—not as a region in inevitable decline, but one that is waiting to be re-invented.

*Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation and convener of the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit [www.longislandindex.org](http://www.longislandindex.org).*