NYC Guide: The Edge of Astoria
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Introduction

An extensive range of architecture, infrastructure, and industry characterizes the northern perimeter of Astoria, Queens. I selected this area as the focus of my New York City Guide in part because I find it fascinating in its mix of land uses and architectural styles, and in part because I expect it is likely to change dramatically in the next two decades — the latter based both on recent patterns of development in the wider neighborhood of Astoria, and on a proposed zoning change for Rikers Island. My guide is a mix between a walking tour of historical sites in the area, a review of current land use, an informal photographic survey, and a long-term projection for neighborhood change.

Land Use: The Current Edge

The walking tour begins where East Elmhurst meets Astoria, taking the visitor along the main routes of 19th and 20th Avenues and onto the smaller 41st Street, Berrian Boulevard, and Steinway Place. The route traces what is essentially the edge of northern Astoria, moving east to west. Despite the neighborhood being bordered by the East River on both the north and the west, the tour does not hit the geographical edge, where the land meets the water, until its conclusion. Due to current land use regulations, much of this area is closed to the public; the majority is designated for heavy manufacturing.1 Guiding the visitor along the border between the manufacturing and residential zones, and into the section that is designated for light manufacturing and mixed-use, the walking tour follows what is, for the general public, the accessible edge of northern Astoria.
This zoning map shows how the land that is the focus of the tour is currently divided. The map has been adapted from its original version, with original shading greyed for emphasis. Yellow shading marks the edge of the residential zone and purple marks manufacturing; light purple marks light manufacturing (accessible), while darker purple (M3-1) marks heavy manufacturing (closed to the public). Pink (Rikers Island and North Brother Island in this map) are currently zoned as commercial.

**Walking Tour: The Sites**

Within this area, a number of historically significant sites reflect the development of both the neighborhood and New York City as a whole, as well as patterns of land use, economic and political power, and industrialization that characterized American urbanization in the 19th and 20th centuries. I believe these sites will either be altered or face possible demolition in the near future. Some but not all of the sites included in this guide are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (National Register), but this does not preclude alteration or demolition. Some are designated New York City landmarks and therefore have a greater degree of protection from alteration or demolition, namely, any proposed changes must be approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). However, none of the sites are protected in perpetuity.

**Lent-Riker-Smith Homestead (1654-1656)**

The Lent-Riker-Smith Homestead is among the oldest extant buildings in New York City. The home was originally built by Abraham Riker (Dutch immigrant, né Rycken), the first owner of record of Rikers Island. Although the Riker family sold the island long before the jail that bears their name was built, they had ties to the slave trade, race-based violence, and abuses
of power that presaged the injustices that continue to be inflicted there today; Richard Riker, a descendant of Abraham and New York City’s first district attorney, was known for using his position to sell free black New Yorkers into slavery under the guise of the Fugitive Slave Act.

The Lent-Riker-Smith Homestead and its grounds, which include gardens and a cemetery, remained in the possession of the Riker family from its construction through the 20th century. A New York City Landmark and included on the National Register, the site is privately owned and requires approximately $100,000 in annual maintenance. It is easy to imagine that this amount could lead a future owner to claim economic hardship to the LPC, thereby opening the door to possible demolition.

Steinway Factory (1870-1872)

Steinway & Sons piano manufacturing company was established in Manhattan in 1850 by
Henry Steinway (German immigrant, né Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg). In 1870, Henry’s son William purchased a 400-acre site in Astoria and relocated the factory and headquarters. The anti-union William “was motivated by the desire to remove large numbers of his employees from the influence of [Manhattan] labor organizers and to provide additional production facilities.”

The contemporary Steinway Factory sits on an 11-acre site and comprises 27 buildings, not all in use, nor are they all original. In 2000, the company completed an extensive restoration, making buildings more efficient and reopening some of the spaces that had been closed; the work was subsidized in the form of $7 million worth of real estate abatements. Steinway & Sons remains a profitable business and a global leader in piano manufacturing and is likely to continue operations in Astoria, if not remain intact as a site; neither the buildings nor the property has historic designation. In 2020, roughly half the property was sold to Wildflowers Studios, a production company owned by Robert DeNiro. Plans are underway to demolish some of the buildings on the property, which reportedly have not been used for piano manufacturing, and start construction on production facilities in the summer of 2020.
The Steinway family played a significant role in the economic and social development of this part of Astoria, reflected in other stops on the walking tour. On the same 400-acre site, William Steinway established Steinway Village, an informal company town with shopping, recreation, transportation, and housing for factory employees. Some of the original housing remains, with buildings varying in level of maintenance and alteration. Neither the privately-owned homes nor the district have historic designation, though they did for a brief time: the LPC designated the Steinway Historic District in 1975, but residents successfully had the designation nullified that same year. At the time, there were 29 homes. The designation was nullified at the request of 22 owners, in part because they had not been involved in the proposal.
Cornerstones on the extant buildings reveal old street names, which reportedly came from names of workers; this marker says “Winthrop Av” on the 20th Avenue side (front in image, above the yellow sign) and “Theodore Ct” on the 42 Street side.

The home at right reveals extensive alteration, with the façade covered by a restaurant.

Steinway Mansion (1858)

At the other end of the housing spectrum is Steinway Mansion. The hilltop estate was built in 1858 and purchased by the Steinway family in 1870 to serve as their country residence. It is reportedly “the only surviving example in Queens of an aristocratic Victorian country home.” Originally part of the same 400-acre site, the estate was reduced to about an acre in 1926. The 12,285-square-foot mansion is a designated New York City Landmark and is on the National Register, although the property itself is not designated. Privately owned, the site was at the center of a controversial sale in 2014, in which it was acquired by two “Astoria-raised investors” who remained anonymous. The property has since been sub-divided for commercial development, as a local preservation group had feared in opposing the sale. With the expected financial gain from the commercial development, it is perhaps less likely that the owners of this site, as opposed to at the Lent-Riker-Smith Homestead, could claim economic hardship to the LPC as a strategy to pursue demolition; however, the site remains relatively mysterious, with new development projects varying in states of completion and the mansion itself essentially closed in on its sides.
Bowery Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant (1940)

From their hilltop mansion, the Steinway family could look down to the East River waterfront and see another part of the veritable empire they had built — the Bowery Bay Beach and Gala Amusement Park, which opened in 1886 and was known as “the Coney Island of Queens.” Due to increased water pollution, declining use and other factors, the beach and its attractions were closed by the 1920s, with much of the waterfront area filled in to serve industrial purposes. The Bowery Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant was one of three sewage facilities built in New York City under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1937 and 1944. Still in use today, the site is occupied primarily by industrial equipment, but a stunning Art Deco building sits at its front entrance. Built in 1940 as part of the larger WPA project, the building is used by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the agency that runs the plant. It is
not open to the public, though much of it remains visible behind fencing, nor does it have historic designation. I expect that, if the proposed zoning change described in the next section is approved, the building will be demolished within the next decade.

Though the view is partially blocked by fencing, the Bowery Bay Wastewater Treatment Plant is visible from Berrian Boulevard. The Art Deco building was constructed in 1940 under the WPA.

Cast reliefs by sculptor Cesare Stea, glass bricks, and Art Deco details adorn the building’s façade.

Marine Terrace (1948)

After guiding the visitor to the sites described above, my walking tour heads westward along 19th and 20th Avenues and concludes at Marine Terrace, an example of the many post-World War II apartment complexes constructed in Queens. When it was built in 1948, Marine Terrace was the largest private housing development in Astoria, with approximately 1,400 units. At a date unknown to me, the property was divided and Marine Terrace reduced its number of units. In 1980, the complex was converted to subsidized affordable housing under the Section 8 program. In 2016, the Related development company purchased Marine Terrace and
built two new buildings on the property. The Section 8 contract for the original buildings, which hold 444 units, was extended through 2036. The units in the new buildings, 53 in total, are rent-restricted but not Section 8, with rental preference going to low-income veterans.

I chose to include this site less for its historical significance and more for the questions it raises about contemporary affordable housing, specifically with regard to private ownership and long-term affordability. What motivates large development companies like Related to purchase and manage Section 8 properties? Is it a relatively safe investment that offsets high-risk projects like Hudson Yards? How significant is the developer’s economic investment when measured against financial incentives received? According to a local labor union, Related’s purchase was supported by a subsidized $99 million loan. What will happen in 2036 when the Section 8 contract at Marine Terrace ends? These questions are not answered in my guide, but are important ones to ask in light of the potential changes that could lie ahead for the neighborhood.

A comparison of an early marketing brochure and a current Google map view shows that the buildings on the waterside property remain much the same structurally. Today, the Marine Terrace apartments, outlined in pink, occupy roughly half of the site.
Land Use: Potential Changes Ahead

In 2019, the New York City Council voted to close the jail on Rikers Island by 2026. A central part of this plan is a land use change: converting the island to use for public space, from its current commercial zoning designation, would prohibit the incarceration of people there.\(^{55}\) This zoning change is currently in the city’s uniform land use review process (ULURP).\(^ {56}\)

Various proposals for future land use on Rikers Island have surfaced in anticipation of the Planning Commission’s approval. The Queens Borough President, a position for which there is currently a special election,\(^ {57}\) will play a key role in determining future land use at Rikers.

The Renewable Rikers proposal, sponsored by City Council Member Costa Constantinides\(^ {58}\) — who both represents the district in which Rikers is located and is a candidate for Queens Borough President — seems to have the most traction and public support. Comprising three bills, the proposal calls for the construction of a wastewater treatment facility and renewable energy facilities on Rikers; and a transfer of control of the island from the Department of Corrections to the DEP.\(^ {59}\)

Implications

Renewable Rikers would drastically impact Queens and the city as a whole. Among several major changes, it would relocate Bowery Bay and additional wastewater treatment plants
to Rikers, removing industrial facilities from proximity to residential areas and making the waterfront land on which they sit available for public use. Additionally, the plan could open up nearly 12 miles of shoreline for public access. Details of the plan reflect its driving goals of environmental, racial, and economic justice for the communities most impacted by industry, climate change, and the city’s penal system.

If the initial zoning change for Rikers Island and the subsequent Renewable Rikers plan are approved, I believe that significant financial investment will pour into northern Astoria from large developers like Related. This will in turn make it less likely that the environmental, racial, and economic justice sought by the authors and supporters of Renewable Rikers will be achieved. Additionally, it will threaten the long-term preservation of some of the sites included in my guide — for example, the WPA building at Bowery Bay, which I predict will be demolished, if not for economic reasons than for the site remediation that would be required on that land — as well as the long-term affordability of Marine Terrace and other housing in the area. I say this all based on both recent development throughout Astoria, particularly on its waterfronts, and on historical patterns; big money hasn’t traditionally supported the preservation of existing buildings over new construction, nor has it been a driver of environmental justice, housing justice, or fair access to public space.

Conclusion

How this unfolds depends in large part on who is elected Queens Borough President and who sits on the City Council and in the Mayor’s Office when final decisions regarding current and future land use are made. It also depends on who supports causes like architectural heritage preservation, fair housing, and climate justice versus big money, profit-driven planning, and the inequalities they can cause. This guide is my attempt to understand the changes that may lie
ahead for the area through the lens of its history; to document it as it is now, on the edge of transformation; and to point out some interesting sites along the way.

2 Ibid
9 Ibid.
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23 Tarleton, “Field Trip.”
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28 Ibid.
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