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NY HEARD & SCENE | May 24, 2013, 8:08 p.m. ET

Fire Island's Social Center

The Redesigned Pavilion in the Fire Island Pines Will Open Soon

By MARSHALL HEYMAN



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There may be no other outdoor space that functions like the Pavilion in the Fire Island Pines. It is meant to serve as a kind of town square, complete with adjacent retail components. But it is also a gathering space just off the beach, both a hangout and more of a nightclub, where "low tea"—when people casually mingle with drinks in the late afternoon—morphs into "high tea."

Regulars of the Pines fondly recall when the first iteration of the Pavilion was built in the mid-1980s. "It's still in everyone's memories," said Matthias Hollwich, an architect at HWKN, who helped design the latest Pavilion. It was meant to open Memorial Day weekend, but as of late this week had been postponed until next. "People have the greatest stories to tell, they're very emotionally connected to it."



Enlarge Image

Michael Moran/OTTO

The Pavilion in Fire Island Pines

Originally, the Pavilion was designed rather informally like a shed, with a bar on the upper floor that allowed you to look down at the crowd. "It was modest but also very functional. It had equal spaces outdoors and indoors, but it allowed people to mix and mingle," said Mr. Hollwich.

He recalled a vintage photograph taken around the Fourth of July, at the height of the Pavilion's popularity, when these big

boats arrived at the Pines full of drag queens, and "you see the image of this building being packed with people, on the boardwalk and on the terrace. The interesting thing was the architecture hid behind the community."

The Pavilion was renovated and rebuilt a little over a decade ago, said Mr. Hollwich, but it had forgotten, in a way, its roots. "Fire Island is a place about leaving the city behind you and experiencing nature and community. This building had nothing to do with that context." The terrace was removed; wood was replaced with drywall, which made the building more resistant against weather conditions, "but people never really fell in love with it. It felt like any nightclub in the city. It was still the Pavilion, but it didn't have the pivotal role in the community."

When that version of the Pavilion burned down 18 months or so ago, Mr. Hollwich and his firm thought about pursuing the job of bringing it back; almost concurrently, Fire Island developers sought out HWKN, which has done work, for instance, on gay retirement communities in Palm Springs.

Mr. Hollwich saw this third iteration as a chance to bring back the Pavilion's "informality and modesty," so that you could walk there from the beach in your bathing suit, while at the same time thinking about it as a formal socializing focal point of the community.

Now, the whole building is built out of wood, the most common material in the Pines. "Now, it's almost like an extension of the boardwalk," Mr. Hollwich said.

On top of that, the idea was to use the "architecture to become a social engine," he added. To that end, the building is open to every side, meaning you can see what's going on inside from the outside. The bar on the second floor is triangular, forcing more social interaction. The dance space now has bleachers that go up 7 or 8 feet, creating a more theatrical, people-watching experience.

Mr. Hollwich described the 2,500-square-foot space as "very novel." "It's one of the most intense spaces for socializing that I know," he explained. His closest project, he said, was a concert hall in Portugal he helped design when he worked with the architect Rem Koolhaas.

"It's about how you invite people in, how you give them an arrival experience and a performance," said Mr. Hollwich, comparing a performance arts venue and the Pavilion. "And after the performance, they go into the bar and continue to socialize."

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