

# *from The New Yorker*

January 25, 1999  
TALK OF THE TOWN

## **Good Neighbors Dept.**

*Sagaponack Homeowners Association vs. Ira Rennert*

**by Malcolm Gladwell**

Now that the strange case of the Sagaponack Homeowners Association vs. Ira Rennert appears to be concluded, it may be time to reflect on what has--and has not--been learned from this, the season's most engrossing episode of rich-on-rich violence. Rennert, as is now widely known, is the multimillionaire industrialist who is building a forty-two-thousand-square-foot single-family home, reported to cost a hundred million dollars, on a sixty-three-acre Hamptons potato field. The Sagaponack Homeowners Association is the opposing group of angry neighbors whose petition to withdraw Rennert's building permits was voted down earlier this month by the Town of Southampton's Zoning Appeals Board. The battle has been a long and heated one, about zoning laws and ocean views, and it has left those of us without homes in the Hamptons more than a little confused. Herewith,

then, a brief guide for the uninitiated.

Let's start with the least technical, but perhaps the philosophically thorniest, question raised by the case. Why, in an area full of very big houses, is the prospect of a very, very big house so controversial? The answer is that "big" is a relative term. A standard new monster home in the Hamptons, for example, now runs between ten thousand and fourteen thousand square feet, which is to say that it probably has six or seven large bedrooms (each with its own bathroom), a great hall, a formal living room, an informal living room, a dining room, a media room, a library, a five-to-six-hundred-square-foot kitchen, maids' quarters, a pantry, and, say, a three-or four-car garage. "Some houses have a squash court, and I've built a few with bowling alleys," Kurt Andreassen, a local contractor, said.

When Southampton decided, this fall, to place a limit on the size of all new houses, it settled on twenty thousand square feet, on the ground that that figure represents a reasonable limit, given the big-house norms of the area. At twenty thousand square feet, a house has perhaps ten or eleven bedrooms, a dozen bathrooms, a six-car garage, and maybe, oh, a mini-trading floor for the kids. By comparison, Rennert's house, at forty-two thousand square feet, has twenty-nine bedrooms, thirty-three bathrooms, and two bowling alleys. What the Town of Southampton was saying, in other words, is that twelve bedrooms and one bowling alley is fine, but twenty-nine bedrooms and two bowling alleys is not. Think of the twenty-thousand figure as the community standard--a social consensus--for the maximum size a Hamptons monster home ought to be. With that extra bowling alley and those seventeen

additional bedrooms, Rennert just went too far.

Which brings us to question two: If twenty thousand square feet represents the Hamptons monster-home limit, then why didn't the Town of Southampton pass this zoning restriction long ago, before Rennert started building his dream house? You might think that it was because the town had been lax about zoning. But that is not the case. For example, the Sagaponack potato field where Rennert is building his house is zoned R-120, which means that the minimum lot size in the area for anyone looking to build a new house is three acres. There is also on eastern Long Island virtually no land zoned specifically for multifamily rental apartments. If you wanted to build an apartment house in the town of Southampton for people who are not millionaires, you would have to go before the town board and ask for a special variance. In Sagaponack, according to Paul Houlihan, Southampton's chief building inspector, such a variance would be impossible to get.

Suppose, then, that Rennert was not a multimillionaire but only a millionaire and couldn't afford the standard Sagaponack three-acre plot-which runs somewhere

between seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars and a million dollars. He wants one acre. And suppose that, to make things more affordable, he wants to put up a small town house with a couple of apartments that he could rent out. Under Southampton zoning rules, his application would be denied outright, even though that little town house wouldn't block anyone's view of the beach. But a forty-two-thousand-square-foot house on sixty-three acres? According to the original zoning laws of the town, perfectly legal. In other words, the citizens of Southampton have lots of rules in place to protect their community from people who have less money than they do. It just never occurred to them, until Rennert came their way, that they also need to protect their community from people who have more money than they do.

© 1999 Malcolm Gladwell