The Clubhouse

Looking outward: At the new Bridge clubhouse on Long Island, huge roof "blades" capture wind to cool the interior naturally.

Reimagined

For 120 years, the social centers of great private clubs have been designed as supersize versions of their members' homes. Several high-profile new clubs, however, are attempting to change all that.

BY JONATHAN LESSER

COURTESY OF ARCH PHOTO

Let there be light: The grillroom at the Bridge clubhouse (left), like most spaces in the building, features floor-to-ceiling glass. Below: Club founder Robert Rubin (right) with architect Roger Ferris, who says of his radical design, "It's about arcs. It's about tension and energy. So we think we're speaking to golf." Opposite: a rendering of the Liberty National clubhouse

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF ARCH PHOTO; GORDON M. GRANT. OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF LIBERTY NATIONAL GOLF CLUB

*I*N THE LAST DECADE OF THE NINETEENTH century, the most fashionable architect in America was arguably Stanford White of the firm McKim, Mead & White, so, naturally, it was he whom the founders of Shinnecock Hills, the first formalized golf club in the country, called upon to build their clubhouse. That clubhouse was, and still is, a sprawling yet homey, elegant yet modest manse in the gray-shingle Victorian style commonly found on the sand hills on which it sits in the summer resort town of Southampton, New York. Its "housing form" style set the standard for clubhouse architecture that still exists today.

A few summers ago I'd been to Shinnecock to cover the U.S. Open. I'd stood on the famed wide-plank veranda, which is the biggest porch I've ever seen—it's so long that members could lose weight pacing it. But on a recent Sunday morning I drove past it on my way to a brand-new, radically designed golf clubhouse that lies ten miles to the northeast of Shinnecock. If Stanford White's creation was "Mr. Tambourine Man," then Roger Ferris's clubhouse at the Bridge is Dylan going electric at Newport.

It is 80 percent glass (shock!), with the rest of the exterior made of zinc steel, a deep gray-blue metal that picks up both the Great Peconic Bay, visible below, and the sky. The building looks more like a contemporary airport terminal than any clubhouse I've ever seen. Sitting on the highest point of a hilly 520-acre tract, it offers a 270-degree view of the water, Sag Harbor, Shelter Island and the Connecticut shore across the Long Island Sound. The clubhouse, which opened last spring, is only twenty-two-feet tall at its zenith, and it rises there at a very gentle slope, so the structure seems to lie on the landscape as a cat does on a lap. "It's gentle," Ferris told me from his Westport, Connecticut, office. "It's formidable in terms of its sculptural articulation, what I call the 'radical

"We're not going to beat Shinnecock," said Bridge

gesturalism' of it. But it's also light and transparent and poetic. It's not screaming, 'Look at me.'"

If it is screaming anything, in fact, it's just the opposite. The sharp corners, the giant eaves, the edge of the vast patio—everything points outward. The views inspired the design, and the design defers to them. Even the men's locker room has a grand window offering a panorama of the course and the bay. (Note to members: Wear towels, please.)

The building's most prominent feature is its gently arcing triangular roof panels, five of them (a sixth is atop the separate pro shop) joined in the middle to form what looks from above like a flexed hand. Ferris calls them the "blades," and they are designed to capture the prevailing wind to cool the interior naturally (there is no need for air-conditioning in this eco-friendly design), to provide shade on the massive ground-level Chinese-granite terrace that surrounds the building, and to collect rainwater with which to irrigate the course. They also, not coincidentally, look kind of like a car engine's turbine wheel—an homage to the land's previous life as the Bridgehampton Race Circuit. The design combines this past with the present. "It's about flight," Ferris said. "It's about swinging the golf club. It's about arcs. It's about tension and energy. So we think we're speaking to golf that way."

But if history is any indication, such a design will not succeed. "When new hard-edge buildings enter a golf environment, there's something scary about them," said Houston-based architect Robert McKinney, who has more than two dozen clubhouses to his credit. "Most of the time, particularly when it's textureless, it's just not really a warm and inviting place. In a clubhouse, you're taking meals, taking a shower, relaxing with your friends, having a drink and so forth. Most people seem to be more comfortable in a traditional environment than in something you'd expect for the replacement of the World Trade Center."

In golf's roughly 120-year history in the United States, the clubhouse has always taken a back seat to the course. "Pick up any golf magazine and look at the way the clubhouse is portrayed," noted McKinney. "It's always in the background. There

clubhouse architect Ferris. "So why try to replicate it?"

In 1924, Nakoma members balked at $70,000 for a

will be a shot down the fairway, there will be the people or trees, and the clubhouse is in the background, in a supporting role. And whenever it gets to be a little too much into itself, it just doesn't seem to fit very well."

Yet here's a quote from the website of another new private club, also in the New York City area: "Liberty National's clubhouse is the jewel in the crown of the entire Liberty National development." Like the clubhouse at the Bridge, the one at Liberty National will be mostly glass. It will rise three stories tall and have a dramatic curving roofline. And like the clubhouse at the Bridge, it will be very, very different from any structure ever seen on a golf course in America.

The nontraditional approach: Two of golf's rare, off-beat architectural designs include Frank Lloyd Wright's Nakoma clubhouse in California (above) and Pennsylvania's Huntsville Golf Club (left), about which the general manager declares, "Once inside, it's quite attractive."

THERE HAS BEEN SOME PROGRESSIVE CLUBhouse architecture in Europe and Asia (see page TK), but here at home, clubhouses have been predictable or, as Ferris said, "noneventful." Shinnecock and a handful of other iconic buildings—the stone-wall, slate-roof mansion at Winged Foot Golf Club in Mamaroneck, New York; the sprawling primrose-yellow Colonial at The Country Club in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts; the English Tudor at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, New Jersey—all share one quality: They are grand houses in the common style of their respective regions, essentially supersize versions of members' homes. Architecturally speaking, to get from Stanford White's clubhouse at Shinnecock to those at the Bridge and Liberty National is not easy. There is no line to trace, not even a dotted one. As American architecture went through its twentieth-century phases—modernism, postmodernism, new pluralism—you wouldn't have known it if you spent all your time on a golf course.

"The clubhouse hasn't ever really been considered a true site for architecture; there has been no attention paid," said Ferris. His own eclectic oeuvre runs from the Dreamworks SKG studio in Playa Vista, California, to St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis to the wood-and-concrete, cubist-looking residential "Lake House" in Weston, Connecticut, but his only previous clubhouse was the traditional one he designed in 1990 for Aspetuck Valley Country Club in Connecticut (though he is an avid golfer, with memberships at three clubs, including the Bridge). "For some reason, they have to be buildings that are homelike. It has to do with the conservatism of the institution of golf in America."

For sure, some nontraditional clubhouses have been built—or almost built, as was the case in 1924, when members of the Nakoma Golf Club in Madison, Wisconsin, refused to

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF NAKOMA GOLF RESORT; COURTESY OF HUNTSVILLE GOLF CLUB. OPPOSITE (FROM TOP): BRIAN SMITH; LC LAMBRECHT (2)

cough up $70,000 to build a clubhouse designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. (The teepee-inspired design finally was built in 2001 at the Nakoma Golf Resort in Clio, California.) One of the reasons there isn't contemporary architecture on golf courses, according to McKinney, is, in fact, cost—not just to design and construct but also to maintain. Wright's buildings, for instance, were known to leak on occasion; it's what happens when you create something, using new materials, that's never been done before. In Porter, Texas, a serpentine, zero-detail glass clubhouse was constructed for Bentwood Country Club in 1994 and quickly began deteriorating: leaks around the windows, doors jammed shut, a roof that never was watertight. "Most of the money the membership could generate was put into the golf course—turf conditions, sprinkler systems and so forth—because that is, after all, the point of the place," McKinney explained. The building has since been torn down and replaced with a more traditional structure (the club reopened in 2003 under the name Oakhurst Golf Club).

Frank Lloyd Wright design.

At Huntsville Golf Club in Shavertown, Pennsylvania, outside Wilkes-Barre, members have mixed feelings about their long, low, rectangular clubhouse, which opened in 1995 and was designed by the firm of Bohlin Cywinski Jackson. "From the perspective of the members, it's somewhat unattractive when you first drive up," acknowledged general manager Scott Schukraft. "But once inside, it's quite attractive, with its red-cedar timber and teak window wall." Also of note is the clubhouse at Blessings Golf Course in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The structure there, designed by Marlon Blackwell and opened in 2005, features a big, low roof. But it is thick and heavy in appearance, not nearly as radical as, say, the Bridge. And in England, the historic Royal Birkdale Golf Club erected a white, flat-roof Jetsonian clubhouse in the thirties that members today have plenty of derogatory names for but not enough money to replace.

"The clubhouse is the personality of the golf facility or country club," wrote McKinney in his 1997 book, *The Clubhouse: A Brief History of the Golf Clubhouse with Accompanying Notes on Design Issues*. "It must be well thought out and designed. . . . [It must be] harmonious with the sedate atmospheres of the golf course and its grounds and complement the expectations of a membership for its clubhouse as an extension of their homes." So for better or worse, we continue to see locally traditional designs, whether it's the high-columned stone plantation building at Atlanta Country Club (Chapman Coyle Chapman, 2003), the shingled, Hamptons-style classic at Long Island's Atlantic Golf Club (Hart/Howerton, 1993) or the rustic cabins at Red Sky Ranch & Golf Club in Colorado (Hart/Howerton, 2002).

But what if "local" means within eyesight of downtown Manhattan? That was the question Dan Fireman, who owns Liberty

THE CLASSICS

The best clubhouses in America have long been grand buildings in the common style of their respective regions, often built by leading architects. These three are arguably the greatest.

The Country Club Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts (1882)
The iconic clubhouse at this historic locale is actually a farmhouse that was converted by the club's founders when The Country Club opened in 1882. It was expanded to include locker rooms and accommodations for overnight stays, as well as the balcony that would famously host a celebratory Ryder Cup party in 1999.

Shinnecock Hills Golf Club Southampton, New York (1891)
The gold standard of clubhouses. Designed by Stanford White at the height of his career, it was the first such structure built in this country and by almost universal acclaim is still the best. "We're not going to beat Shinnecock," admitted Bridge clubhouse designer Roger Ferris. "So why try to replicate it?"

Winged Foot Golf Club Mamaroneck, New York (1924)
Only a peerless clubhouse would suit A. W. Tillinghast's crowning achievement—the East and West courses at Winged Foot—and for that, the founders turned to Clifford Charles Wendehack, who hired masons to shape this handsome building out of native rock.

Liberty National will be "light and airy," a

National Golf Club with his father, Reebok founder Paul Fireman, asked himself when building the club on the New Jersey side of New York Harbor. "Because of its urban setting and the idea that even though we're in Jersey City we're a part of New York City because of our membership," he said, "we wanted to have a clubhouse with architecture that people expect in New York." Construction of the sweeping glass building, which was drawn up by New York–based Lindsay Newman Architecture and Design, began a year ago and is expected to be completed by the summer of 2008. Said project director Joel Brenner: "When you go to a golf club, the architecture is usually pretty far in, in a private setting. You don't see it right away, and it is supposed to be comforting and residential-like. But here we are exposed to New York City: metropolitan, sleek and chic. So we're going to make the structure light and airy, a nautical feel, an open feel. It wants to be bright; it wants to be exposed. We are essentially a golf club in the middle of New York City. A traditional approach would not be appropriate."

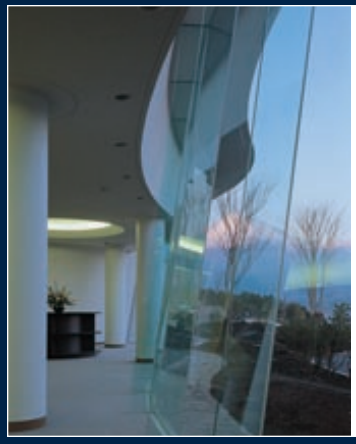
Located on the waterfront (six minutes by ferry from lower Manhattan), the clubhouse will indeed be on full public display, with a 360-degree view that takes in the Statue of Liberty, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and, of course, the New York City skyline. Behind the clubhouse will be three high-end residential towers, varying from thirty-seven to fifty stories in height, part of Liberty National's integrated public and private development. Although the golf club will be private—with memberships costing upward of $450,000—the shops and restaurants on the property will not.

LIBERTY NATIONAL AND THE BRIDGE may be breaking the architectural mold for golf clubhouses, but will others follow suit? Probably not. "You can't apply conventional logic and opinions to these two clubhouses, because they are so unique. They are unto themselves," said Robert McKinney. True, especially when one considers the owners of these clubs. The person behind the Bridge clubhouse is not Roger Ferris but the man who hired him: Robert Rubin, a fifty-three-year-old Wall Street tycoon who has sunk $37 million of his own money into the club and certainly doesn't need members' approval on his design plans for the clubhouse. He was an amateur racecar driver who bought the land in the eighties. He ran it as a track until 1997, when it was no longer feasible because of increasing town limits on operating hours and noise levels. He also didn't play golf—at all—when he began the Bridge project. He hadn't been to all the world's great golf clubs; he had no preconceived notions of what a clubhouse should be.

Despite his vast personal wealth, Rubin has little in common with another, more famous New York mogul turned golf course developer. In fact, Rubin is the anti-Trump. His hair is messy. He relishes the fact that he is not maximizing the value of his property (he chose to build just eighteen holes and twenty houses on 370 acres in Southampton—adjacent to another 150 acres of protected woodlands—that could easily handle two courses and hundreds of homesites). He wants the Bridge to be a family club rather than a stuffy one. On the morning I met him, he was unshaved and wore weathered khakis and an equally worn-in bucket hat. Only his golf shoes were bespoke, one of the pairs he had made as gifts for each

THE INTERNATIONALS

According to Roger Ferris, the architect of the Bridge clubhouse, most of the radically designed golf clubhouses are located in Asia and Europe. Here are three prime examples.



Fujinomiya Golf Club
Shizuoka, Japan (1997)
Designed by leading Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, the two-story, reinforced-concrete clubhouse at Fujinomiya Golf Club features graciously curving exterior walls and roof. Large glass panels display a 360-degree vista of the surrounding mountainous landscape, including postcard views of Mount Fuji.

"sleek and chic" structure with a "nautical, open feel."

charter member of the Bridge (they feature a strip of the club's tartan, if you will: a checkered-flag pattern).

This is Bob Rubin: self-made multimillionaire, nontraditional to the core. Hanging in the temporary locker room at the Bridge when I visited were framed photos of both Fidel Castro and Che Guevara playing golf—something you probably wouldn't find at the old-guard clubs nearby. In addition to having a sense of humor, Rubin is also a Ph.D. candidate in architectural theory and history at Columbia University, so he didn't simply hire Ferris and turn over the keys.

As the structure neared completion, Rubin said he was getting only positive feedback from members, most of whom, knowing the founder, were not surprised by the unusual nature of the design. "I'm getting a lot of converts to modern architecture," he said. "I think some people are attracted by the fact that the clubhouse is a contemporary design." Added Ferris: "Maybe members are interested in contemporary architecture but don't have the nerve to build a very contemporary house. This is, in a way, their other home in the summer, so maybe they can enjoy it on that level. Hopefully it becomes a model for future golf clubs and it filters down and public courses start having more inventive clubhouses."

Meanwhile, at Liberty National, the Firemans and their team felt an obligation to make an architectural splash. "This is unique because the course is surrounded by these beautiful iconic elements," said project director Brenner. "Looking from the harbor, we're the backdrop to the Statue of Liberty; from the golf course, the statue and the city form a backdrop to our clubhouse. That makes for a very interesting play of architecture: How do we respond to and be a backdrop to the Statue of Liberty and be responsible to the beauty of arriving in New York Harbor?"

Robert McKinney joked that you probably wouldn't want to play golf at Liberty National. "You'll just want to sit there and have a drink and look at New York," he said. "And the views from inside the Bridge clubhouse are going to be absolutely unbelievable. Are they going to have anybody with a single-digit handicap? Does anybody there even own clubs?" •

A Royal plain: Members at Royal Birkdale Golf Club have plenty of derogatory names for their 1935 clubhouse (right) but have yet to replace it. Opposite: the contemporary clubhouse at Blessings Golf Course in Arkansas, which opened in 2005

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: C. CARLYLE ROOD; COURTESY OF HOTEL QUINTA DA MARINHA RESORT; THOMAS YEH; COURTESY OF KISHO KUROKAWA ARCHITECT & ASSOCIATES; COURTESY OF BLESSINGS GOLF COURSE

Öijared Golfklubb Floda, Sweden (1988)
In western Sweden, in an opening in the forest where the land is rocky and barren, Swedish architect Gert Wingårdh built a postmodern cave as the clubhouse for the Öijared Golfklubb. Aside from the glass front façade, the exterior of the building is earth, grass, stone, wood and red limestone.

Oitavos Golf Course Cascais, Portugal (2001)
The Arthur Hills–designed Oitavos course is part of the luxurious Quinta da Marinha resort on the Lisbon coast. Its two-story, flat-roof clubhouse, designed by José Anahory, is dominated by giant glass windows and outdoor decks offering views of the golf course and the Atlantic Ocean.