



Long Island  
in the 60s

*Long Island in the 1960s*

*A Visual Essay*

By Joshua Ruff and The Long Island Museum of American Art,  
History & Carriages, Stony Brook, NY

The following images originate from an exhibition organized by The Long Island Museum, in Stony Brook, that detailed the cultural, social, and political landscape of the region in the 1960s. The exhibition was on view in the Art Museum's 2,800 square foot main gallery, from June 24 through December 31, 2016.

Over 200 objects were displayed, originating from a variety of collections, including the Long Island Museum's own, as well as Cradle of Aviation Museum, Stony Brook University's Special Collections and University Archives, Smithtown Historical Society, The New-York Historical Society, the Queens Museum of Art, and many others. Throughout this visual essay, individual photographic archives and collections are acknowledged and properly credited.

**Previous slide:** opening Modernist living room vignette, c. 1969, with artifacts on loan from KNOLL®, The Archive Collection, Design Within Reach, Robert and Katherine Downs-Reuter, John Riccardelli, and a private collection.



**Audience watching the Beatles arrive at Shea Stadium, August 15, 1965**

Associated Press photograph

Long Island had a wealthier economy than 27 states by 1970, but its rapid transformation arrived with complex new realities. The earlier part of the decade was an era of optimism: the age of Camelot, the Beatles, and rock and roll. Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon recognized the region's up-and-coming status, making presidential campaign stops at the Long Island Arena (in Commack) in 1960. The 1964 World's Fair, perched off Grand Central Parkway, was well situated for a celebration of American capitalist and pop cultural preeminence.

As the decade marched on, Long Island experienced a microcosm of the same powerful forces shaking the rest of the nation. The Civil Rights Movement impacted local school district and housing integration. Long Island residents, like Americans everywhere, questioned the status quo in foreign policy, gender, and the meaning of "traditional" American life.

By the late '60s, even the region's suburban identity was being reshaped. The early postwar mass exodus of "Levittowners"—often first-time homebuyers—had given way to a populace looking for larger homes, shorter commutes, and a wider array of ages and cultural interests. "Suburb dwellers have changed," reported *Newsday*, in 1968. "They are better educated, making more money...and you had better not call one a suburbanite to [their] face."





At the start of the 1960s, Long Island was still the nation's fastest growing suburb. But the focus was shifting steadily eastward. Nassau County had been touted in the 1950s as "Boomtown, USA," but saw its vacant property and population growth dwindle in the new decade. Suffolk County briefly became the nation's fastest growing place. Some of the eastward-moving pioneers cashed in on the property equity they'd achieved in starter homes, settling in newer developments.



The white ethnic middle class continued fleeing New York City's five boroughs, and the fastest growth took place along the Long Island Expressway as its construction crept towards Riverhead. Former potato farms off the LIE became overnight ranch house neighborhoods, as the Melville-Half Hollow Hills-Commack area in Huntington saw its population jump 200 percent and the Lakeland-Bohemia-Holbrook area of Islip rose 300 percent.

For many families, "the next generation of suburbia" that characterized Long Island in the 1960s meant a much more individualized, diverse setting than the communal Levittown model of the late 1940s. As a 1968 *Newsday* article put it, "there is no longer such a thing as the typical suburbanite in the new developments: no living in each other's kitchens, no monthly block parties or going halvesies on lawnmowers and electric hedge cutters."

**(Top) Construction at Commack development, c. 1960;**

**(Bottom) A Nesconset suburban neighborhood, 1967.**

Courtesy Smithtown Historical Society.



**Artists gathered on beach, East Hampton, 1962.** Hans Nemuth photograph. Heckscher Museum of Art. In the midst of the continuing suburban exodus, a very different tide – that of contemporary artists – continued to flood Long Island’s East End. In the 1960s, figures such as Jasper Johns, Larry Rivers, and Robert Dash, joined their colleagues in this unique Hamptons setting.





**Ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of Stony Brook University, April 8, 1960 (Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Ward Melville are the two men with shovels in the middle). Courtesy Stony Brook University Special Collections and University Archives.**





Jericho Turnpike (Route 25), Smithtown, 1963. Courtesy Smithtown Historical Society.





Forever changing Brooklyn, Staten Island, and the rest of the region, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge opened just prior to Thanksgiving, in 1964. A crucial new part of New York and Long Island's transportation infrastructure, it became, at the time, the world's longest suspension bridge. Photograph courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.





Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation in Bethpage was awarded the contract for the lunar module (LM) in 1962, the craft used by the Apollo 11 mission to land on the moon, seven years later.

Prototyping, engineering, construction, and development occurred throughout the decade inside Grumman's factories, involving thousands of Long Islanders.

**Photograph, 1967**, courtesy of Cradle of Aviation Museum, Garden City.



**Photograph of Gyrodyne Company hovercraft testing, Stony Brook, c. 1962**  
The Long Island Museum.





Photograph of Gyrodyne Company single-man helicopters, Stony Brook, c. 1962  
The Long Island Museum.





Suburban living room vignette, c. 1968. Furnishings from the collections of Gary and Claudia Hammond and the Long Island Museum.





**Zenith color television set, c. 1963. Long Island Museum.** This television set, given to the museum by a long-time resident of East Quogue, Suffolk County, was an important element in the exhibition's suburban living room vignette. According to one *Newsday* article, color television sets were identified by Long Island merchants as "one of the biggest sellers of the Christmas shopping season" in 1965. Television's phenomenal importance to postwar American suburban life cannot be understated.

# MEET DICK NIXON!



*He's Coming To...*

## SUFFOLK

**Wed. Eve., Sept. 28th, 8 P.M.**

**LONG ISLAND ARENA, COMMACK**

*Come One . . . Come All*

**MEET OUR NEXT PRESIDENT  
RICHARD M. NIXON**

ALSO ON PROGRAM

**U. S. SENATOR KENNETH KEATING**

**U. S. SENATOR JACOB JAVITS**

L. BARRON HILL — PERCY B. INGERMAN

STUYVESANT WAINWRIGHT — ELISHA T. BARRETT

PERRY B. DURYEY, JR. — PRESCOTT B. HUNTINGTON

JAMES R. GROVER, JR.



## DON'T FORGET NIXON NITE SEPT. 28th, 8 P.M.

Long Island Arena, Vets Highway, Commack

*Come-bring your neighbors*

ADMISSION FREE

PARKING FREE

The 1960s saw ferocious political debates in every arena of American public life. Long Island experienced each of the ruptures and clashes that characterized the country during these years, from Civil Rights to public discussions over the Vietnam War.

One of Long Island's foremost Civil Rights leaders, Lincoln Lynch, helped elevate awareness of his movement's local dimensions during a 1963 speech at the Garden City Hotel. Lynch criticized "shameless evidence of undisguised discrimination," arguing that "a moral and psychological wilderness exists on Long Island, as barren as one would find anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line."

In some areas, the region spearheaded crucial national political reforms. The Supreme Court case which eliminated compulsory school prayer, *Engel vs. Vitale* (1962), actually originated in a Long Island classroom in New Hyde Park. In the arena of environmental reform, local advocates succeeded in getting Suffolk County to ban DDT spraying in 1967, the first county in the nation to do so.

Despite such initiatives, the region retained a moderate conservative electorate in the 1960s. Presidential elections provided an excellent barometer of the area's Republican majority. Democrats only managed to win Nassau-Suffolk in 1964, with Lyndon Baines Johnson's slight plurality; although every other election was marked by close races, Nixon took the region for the Republicans in both 1960 and 1968.

(LEFT) Political Broadside, 1960. The Long Island Museum.





Long Island's Civil Rights movement occurred in dialogue with larger national events. On February 1, 1960, four African American students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, walked into their local F.W. Woolworth store and took seats at the lunch counter. They were refused service but stayed and soon inspired similar peaceful demonstrations in cities across the North and South.



One month later, in Jamaica, Queens, members and supporters of the local NAACP chapter picketed the Woolworth's at 162<sup>nd</sup> Street and Jamaica Avenue, to show their solidarity. These are rare photographs of an important early chapter in Long Island's Civil Rights movement.

**(LEFT) Scenes from the NAACP-organized protest in support of the Greensboro, North Carolina, Woolworth Lunch Counter Boycott, Jamaica, Queens, 1960.** Long Island Museum. Gifts of Eugene Burnett.



Senator John F. Kennedy campaigning outside the Long Island Arena, Commack, 1960.  
Associated Press photograph





**Two children studying a sign, Lakeview, Long Island, 1962. Associated Press Photograph**

Throughout the 1960s, chief concerns of Long Island's Civil Rights Movement activists revolved around their efforts to integrate school districts and suburban neighborhoods. This sign was placed in an effort to prevent African Americans from outgrowing the number of white residents in Lakeview, an integrated village just east of Malverne.





By December of 1968, 312 Long Islanders had been killed in service in the Vietnam War, the latest being Sergeant First Class Kenneth Johnson, of Levittown (left). At the same time, many Long Islanders, such as Long Beach Congressman Allard Lowenstein (right), were increasingly becoming involved in the movement for peace. *Newsday* photographs.





**Aerial view of Unisphere and World's Fair grounds, 1964.** Photograph by Richard Braak. Long Island Museum. Gift of Stephanie Braak. It opened just five months after President Kennedy's assassination, on 646 acres of the same site in Queens that had hosted another major world's fair 25 years earlier. The 1964-65 World's Fair was the creation of Robert Moses, who controlled its construction and vision as resolutely as any of his parks, bridges, or roadways. Moses desired a menu of family-friendly entertainment inspired by "bright and shiny Disneyland" and "free of honkey-tonk." Sex, drugs, and rock and roll might have been on the rise, but none of this trinity breached the iron gates of Moses's project in Flushing. The music of Guy Lombardo wafted through the air and the Beatles only appeared as sculptures in the fair's wax museum.





**World's Fair grounds, photograph by Richard Braak, 1964. The Long Island Museum, gift of Stephanie Braak.**





Artifacts from the 1964-65 World's Fair: (left and below) souvenir plate and glasses. The Long Island Museum, gift of William Ayres; (bottom) transportation sign from World's Fair, collection of John Riccardelli.





**1960s dresses from Long Island Museum.  
The Mary and Philip Hulitar Textile Collection.**

“Long Live the Mini!” exclaimed a *Newsday* headline from June 6, 1969, with anecdotal evidence offered that Long Island women would never go back to plunging hemlines. “I wear mine (hemlines) four to five inches above the knee, sometimes higher,” said Patchogue resident Mona Johannessen. “As far as I am concerned, well, I’m not wearing longer skirts. They’re not comfortable.” Another *Newsday* article from the same year indicated that “the beard and the miniskirt, two symbols of youth and rebellion...finally have gained grudging acceptance on Long Island.”

Fashion customers had a growing variety of shopping choices across the region. Following the flow of population eastward, Long Island’s shopping possibilities expanded into Suffolk County, with the opening of the Walt Whitman Mall in Huntington (1962), the South Shore Mall in Bay Shore (1963), and the Smith Haven Mall in Lake Grove (1969). There were also a wide and growing variety of beloved department stores expanding into every major community, either satellites to flagship New York City emporiums or emerging locally-owned operations: Martins of Garden City; Arnold Constable and Abraham & Strauss of Hempstead; Lord & Taylor of Manhasset; and Bloomingdale’s in Fresh Meadows.





**Woman's dress suit, cotton and polyester, designed by Philippe Venet, c. 1963. Long Island Museum. The Mary and Philip Hulitar Textile Collection.**

This suit highlights the geometric and Atomic-inspired forms that were popular in fashion during the mid-Cold War years. The suit was worn by Pamela Thayer (b. 1937), of Sands Point, Long Island, one of the first female executives of Hilton Hotel's Headquarters, New York City.



**Dress, polyester, Joel Schumacher for Paraphernalia, New York, c. 1968. Long Island Museum. The Mary and Philip Hulitar Textile Collection.**

This dress was designed by Parsons Fashion School and FIT graduate Joel Schumacher (b. 1939) who decorated windows at Henri Bendel Department Store before achieving prominence. Schumacher (b. 1939) grew up in a working class section of Long Island City. After his fashion career, he went on to take another unusual career turn and became even more famous later for his work in the movies: he was director of Hollywood hits that included *The Lost Boys* and *Batman Forever*. But before his movie career, Schumacher designed dresses for Paraphernalia, an ultra-hip store on Madison Avenue between 66<sup>th</sup> and 67<sup>th</sup> that opened to much fanfare in 1965 and lasted until the early 1980s.

This mini-dress is very much in line with the types of cutting-edge, pop-culturally influenced clothing they sold in the 1960s. In addition to Schumacher, Paraphernalia's designers included Betsey Johnson and Deanna Little. An early interview with Schumacher in *Newsday* quoted the young designer complaining of "Little Miss Rheingold clothes" and "dresses people wear who are afraid of clothes. I like clothes that have a dramatic, exaggerated look to them," he said.