

The Pioneering “Levittowner”

*William and Alfred Levitt
revolutionized American
housing—and still
have lessons to teach.*

THE TERM “AMERICAN DREAM” acquired common currency in the 1930s, thanks to *The Epic of America* by James Truslow Adams. “There is an ‘American dream’ of a better, richer and happier life for all citizens of every rank,” the Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian wrote. But for most people at that time, the dream of a better life did not include owning their own home. Rapid urbanization had had a severe impact on the tradition of living in your own house. By 1930, less than half of households were homeowners, and these lived chiefly in rural areas. Of the more than half of Americans who lived in cities, a privileged few lived in garden

WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

suburbs, but the majority occupied rented tenements and flats.

During the Depression, the homeownership rate dropped to less than 44 percent (much lower than high-homeownership countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom today, although slightly higher than a low-homeownership country such as Germany today). Then, thanks largely to postwar prosperity and the intervention of the federal government, it rebounded. Hoover's Federal Home Loan Bank Act of 1932 and Roosevelt's Federal Housing Administration stabilized the mortgage market and provided insurance for home mortgages as well as for housing construction loans. Since building had largely stopped during the Depression and the war, the demand for housing was huge.

The question was how to meet it. Many people thought they had the answer. Old New Dealers promoted government-built towns, but the bureaucracy was too slow in reacting to the accelerating demand. The followers of Le Corbusier, the visionary French architect, proposed high-rise apartment towers. Buckminster Fuller unveiled the Dymaxion house, which was to be manufactured in an aircraft factory and resembled a flying saucer. The solution proved to be something entirely different and unplanned: mass-produced suburbs built by private developers or, as Marc Weiss calls them, "community builders." These community

builders were the embodiment of Adam Smith's "Invisible Hand."

THE FIRST LEVITTOWN

The prototype for postwar community builders was Levitt & Sons. The firm built large planned communities—named Levittowns—in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The first Levittown began in 1947 as 2,000 rental houses on western Long Island, part of Truman's Veterans' Emergency Housing Program. Demand proved so strong, however, that the Levitts converted the rentals to ownership units, acquired more land—ultimately 4,700 acres—and in a mere five years built 17,400 houses.

The initial selling price of a Levittown house was remarkably low: \$7,500 (or \$48,000 in today's dollars). Returning GIs could become homeowners with nothing down and monthly payments of only \$65. The Levitts achieved dramatic economies—and a healthy profit of \$1,000 per house—largely by reorganizing the construction process.

The driving force behind the firm was William Levitt, the elder of the two sons. He had served in the Seabees, building barracks for enlisted men in Norfolk, Virginia, and he applied his wartime experience to the traditional world of wood-frame construction. Instead of building

houses one at a time, he divided the construction process into 26 discrete steps, each performed by a separate team of workers, equipped with such labor-saving devices as power tools and paint sprayers. "One team would lay the slabs, another would do the framing, another the roofing and so on," he later recalled. "What it amounted to was a reversal of the Detroit assembly line. There, the car moved while the workers stayed at their stations. In the case of our houses, it was the workers who moved, doing the same jobs at different locations. To the best of my knowledge, no one had ever done that before." To bypass unions, Levitt hired the workers as subcontractors. To speed up the work, he paid them not by the hour but according to the number of houses completed, and traded bad-weather days for Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. Thanks to such tactics, Levitt & Sons boasted that they were able to complete a house every eleven minutes.

William's brother, Alfred, was responsible for design. A self-taught architect, in 1937, when he was 25, he took a leave from the family business and spent ten months on a building site in Great Neck, Long Island. The construction he followed daily was of a relatively modest single-family house, but not just any house. The architect was Frank Lloyd Wright, and the house was one of his so-called Usonians. Wright had coined the term the year before to describe his prototype for the

sorts of houses he visualized for Broadacre City. If he could not realize his urban vision, he could at least show people what a home in the City of Tomorrow would be like. Over the next two decades, he built more than a hundred Usonians across the United States.

"The house of moderate cost is not only America's major architectural problem," Wright proclaimed, "but the problem most difficult for the major architects." Of course, it wasn't too difficult for him. To reduce cost, he invented a highly simplified and modular method of wood construction. He eliminated the basement and the attic, and replaced the garage with a carport. He introduced a novel form of heating—under the floor. He made the kitchen a small work area, and combined the living and dining rooms into a single space. He used polished concrete floors and exposed wood walls and ceilings—natural-looking as well as economical—and designed built-in furniture. Thanks to such innovations, he was able to build houses—beautiful houses—for as little as \$5,500, at a time when his grand Fallingwater house cost \$166,000.

Watching the Great Neck house, which was one of the first Usonians, being built had a great influence on the young Alfred, who became an unlikely conduit for disseminating Wright's ideas into the American mainstream. His first Levittown house was a 750-square-foot cottage, with

two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The interior was small, but an unfinished attic had space for two extra bedrooms, and the 60-foot by 100-foot lot left plenty of room for future additions. The model was called the “Cape Cod,” which conjures up a traditional image (as it was supposed to), but the design incorporated several Usonian features. Alfred did not have a tree growing through the ceiling of the dining room, as Wright did in the Great Neck house, but he did do away with the basement and put radiant heating in the floor.

The “Cape Cod” was only the beginning. To attract buyers, the Levitts changed models every year, which gave Alfred the opportunity to introduce further innovations. These included not only radiant heating but also open plans that combined kitchen, living, and dining spaces, a central fireplace, a built-in television, and a carport. Following Wright’s example, he planned houses on a two-foot module, and used modern materials such as plywood instead of planks, and sheets of gypsum wallboard instead of hand-laid plaster.

Levittown was not only a housing development; it was a planned community. “The veteran needed a roof over his head and instead of giving him just a roof we gave him certain amenities,” recalled William Levitt. “We divided it into sections and we put down schools, swimming

pools, and a village green and necessity shopping centers, athletic fields, Little League diamonds. We wanted community living.” Levittown was advertised as a “Garden Community,” which was an explicit reference to the earlier garden suburbs. As Alexander Garvin points out, it was a highly simplified version of Frederick Law Olmsted’s Riverside, with curving streets, lots of trees (planted by the developer), and houses set well back from the sidewalk on large lots. (Typical lots were 60 feet by 100 feet.) As in Riverside, front fences were prohibited, which left the lawns open, giving the impression of a continuous green landscape.

What set Levittown apart from previous residential developments was not only the number of houses and the speed with which they were built, but also their extreme architectural uniformity. Although buyers were offered relatively minor façade variations, as well as several colors, at any one time there was a single basic house plan. This repetition reduced construction costs by enabling the work crews to efficiently repeat identical building operations, and allowed the use of pre-cut lumber and identical components.

A PLANNED COMMUNITY

The second Levittown, in Bucks County, Pa., was begun in 1951. With 17,300

homes on 6,000 acres, it was advertised as “The Best Planned Community in America.” Alfred divided the site into what he called master blocks, about a mile square, bounded by parkways with limited access. Inside each block, he laid out three or four “neighborhood units” of 400 houses, separated by local streets and landscape features. At the center of each block, no more than a five-minute walk from any house, was an area dedicated to community uses: a park, a recreation center, a swimming pool, or a school. There were no commercial buildings. Instead of local village centers, as in the Long Island development, the Levitts built a mile-long commercial strip along the highway. “Thanks to the number of appliances in our house, the girls have three hours to kill every afternoon,” said Alfred. “They want to find some excitement and they prefer to do even their grocery shopping in the main retail district.” Of course, the “girls” would drive to the supermarket; all the houses had two-car carports. The automobile-centered plan was Alfred Levitt’s homage to Wright’s Broadacre City.

Driving along Levittown’s winding streets today, it’s hard to distinguish the original architectural features of Alfred Levitt’s houses, since they are swathed in garages, annexes, and extensions that have been added during the last 50 years. The 60-foot trees, planted by the Levitts, and the variety of individual gardens

likewise dispel any lingering impression of uniformity.

The Levitts were sensitive to criticisms that their developments were uniform, and for Levittown, Pa., Alfred designed six different house models. The workhorse of the development was the “Levittowner,” which was his most Usonian design. It is what became popularly known as a ranch house (see Figure 1). The exterior, with its low-slung appearance, carport, high-silled bedroom windows, and large areas of glass was distinctly untraditional. So was the wall material, eight-foot-tall striated sheets of asbestos cement, called Colorbestos and developed especially for the Levitts by the Johns-Manville Corp. Alfred designed an open plan with two bedrooms and a third “study-bedroom” that was separated from the living space by a basswood screen that slid on a metal track. The three-way fireplace was visible from the kitchen, the dining area, and the living room. The layout was unusual, since the kitchen faced the street. This saved money on water and sewer connections, but it also oriented the living room to the garden, in true Usonian fashion.

Each house included such newfangled conveniences as a kitchen exhaust fan, pre-assembled metal kitchen cabinets, recessed lighting, and built-in closet shelving. The kitchen came equipped with a G.E. refrigerator and stove and a Bendix washing machine. It also contained the heating fur-

Figure 1: The Levittowner



nace, which was built especially for the Levitts and was small enough to fit under the counter; its top doubled as a hot plate.

For more affluent buyers, Alfred designed the “Country Clubber,” an enlarged version of the “Levittowner,” with a finished attic containing a second bathroom and space for two bedrooms (see Figure 2). The ground floor had two bedrooms and a multi-purpose “garden room,” which could be used as a study or a bedroom. The kitchen included not only a washer and drier, but also a dishwasher. Photographs show the model home furnished with Danish modern furniture, light, glass-topped coffee tables, and straw floor-mats. The modernistic effect is enhanced by an 18-foot-long, floor-to-ceiling glass wall overlooking the garden.

At \$15,500 for 2,000 square feet and \$9,990 for 1,000 square feet, the “Country Clubber” and the “Levittowner” were even better deals than the original “Cape Cod.” The buyers were chiefly workers at U.S. Steel’s nearby new Fairless

Figure 2: The Country Clubber



Works, the largest integrated steel facility ever built in the United States. When the model homes were unveiled, even though it was mid-winter, 50,000 visitors showed up the first week. Sales were so strong that by the time production started in the spring, homes were being built at the rate of 150 a week. At the urging of the local government officials, the Levitts offered a two-bedroom rental unit for \$65 a month. Since the monthly mortgage payment on a Levittowner was \$60, there were few takers, and the so-called “Budgeteer” was soon discontinued.

Lewis Mumford contemptuously referred to the Levitts’ developments as “instant slums,” but there is nothing slum-like about Levittown, Pa. today—nor has there ever been. The houses are well-maintained and the gardens carefully tended. According to the local real estate listings, an expanded “Levittowner” (the name is still used) sells for about \$200,000, and a “Country Clubber” goes for \$375,000. Levittown has prospered. There appears to

be no homeowners' association, for there are recreational vehicles parked in the driveways, a lively profusion of lawn ornaments, and plenty of garden sheds and above-ground pools. This has remained a middle-class community, which would probably have pleased Alfred Levitt.

When Levittown was being built, *House + Home* magazine praised the "progressive" designs, because "in the years ahead Levitt houses will be less out of date than old-fashioned houses built at the same time." In fact, the houses were severely modified over the years. Asbestos was covered with vinyl siding and brick, windows sprouted shutters, large areas of Thermopane were replaced by traditional bay windows, carports were enclosed, and some of the ranch houses grew a second floor. The truth is that most of Alfred's Usonian features fell prey to changing fashions.

Yet one should not underestimate the importance of Levittown. It introduced the American public to modern production building, and demonstrated how standardization, mass-production, and technical innovation could be successfully used to produce houses for a large market. It showed that working Americans were attracted to suburban living no less than their wealthier counterparts. Finally, it showed how entrepreneurial efforts could create cheap, quick, lasting, and flexible housing that could not have been provided by government efforts.

Could the "Levittowner" be built today? Of course, very few new houses today are only 1,000 square feet; in fact, according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), in 2003 only 5 percent of new houses were smaller than 1,200 square feet. The 2003 median size for a new house was 2,137 square feet, which is approximately the size of the upscale "Country Clubber." In 1951, the price of a "Country Clubber" in today's dollars was \$100,000. According to the NAHB, the median price of a new house in 2004 was more than twice as much: \$221,000. What accounts for the difference? Not the cost of house construction, which has held remarkably steady. The construction cost of the Levittown houses is estimated to have been about \$40 per square foot (in today's dollars). A national production builder today builds for \$40 to \$50 per square foot and produces what is, incidentally, a higher quality house that is less standardized, better insulated, and air-conditioned.

What is chiefly responsible for the higher cost of housing is the increased cost of land. In 1951, an improved Levittown lot cost about \$10,000 (in today's dollars). A comparable lot in a northeastern exurb today can easily cost six to eight times as much. In addition, since developers are expected to pay for infrastructure, this

extra price, too, is passed on to the buyer. It is not surprising that with such expensive lots, home builders are building larger and more lavishly appointed houses.

A \$100,000 “affordable” house is well within the capacity of today’s highly efficient home building industry (see “The Grow Home,” *WRER* Spring 2000). The continued desirability of Levittown houses, as mirrored by their high prices, suggests that American living patterns have not changed radically since 1951. An unpretentious, practical house is still, for many, a desirable commodity. The chief obstacle is anti-growth zoning (often masquerading as environmental protection) that in many parts of the country has mandated larger lots and larger houses, and created expensive bureaucratic delays and uncertainties. The effect has been to slow the supply of permitted land to a trickle, driving up the prices of lots—and new homes. Even the ingenious Alfred Levitt could not have got around that.