

EXHIBIT REVIEW

REFLECTIONS ON LEVITTOWN AT FIFTY

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Levittown, Pa.—Building the Suburban Dream, Curtis Miner, curator. The State Museum of Pennsylvania, May 4, 2002–Jan. 5, 2003; the James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, through March 2003.

Levittown. The very name conjures images of mass produced housing, of conformity, of suburban sprawl, and, ultimately, of stereotypes that refuse to die. Jeff Speck, director of town planning for Duany Plater-Zyberk, the stars of the planning movement that calls itself the New Urbanism, recently acknowledged that he had never visited the Levittown that took shape some twenty miles north of Philadelphia in the early 1950s. He didn't need to see it firsthand, he assured readers of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, because the story was all too familiar. Levittown—whether built on former potato fields in Hempstead, New York, or in Willingboro, New Jersey, or in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, as well as in France, Spain, and Puerto Rico (Speck doesn't seem to be aware of the internationalization of the phenomenon)—has become the poster child for postwar suburbanization and the sprawl that transformed the American dream into an American nightmare.¹

On June 23, 1952, the first family moved into what was then the largest comprehensively planned subdivision in the United

States, Levittown, Pennsylvania. The subdivision consumed almost 5,800 acres of land in lower Bucks County and sprawled over four municipalities: Tullytown, Falls Township, Middletown, and Bristol. Ironically, Levittown is identified on the map, but three of the towns of which it is part are not. More important, by being submerged within larger townships, from the time the Levitts completed construction of 17,311 houses in 1958, Levittown has never been able to control its own destiny. Sociologist Chad Kimmel has demonstrated that Bristol Township was, and remains, the poor step-child of the three other municipalities, as have residents who pay higher property taxes and receive poorer services in return.²

Levittown celebrated its 50th birthday in the summer of 2002. A decade ago the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission certified it as significant in the history of the commonwealth by placing a blue and yellow marker along Levittown Parkway. Now, at age 50, Levittown is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The United States has become the first suburban nation, as historian Kenneth T. Jackson has pointed out,³ and critics such as Jeff Speck and Steven Conn have laid the blame squarely on the Levitts—father Abraham and sons William and Alfred—and the world they created. Conn, for example, recently dismissed Levittown as “a social failure and an environmental disaster.”⁴

The saga of the Levitt family as community builders is well known. Abraham Levitt began his career erecting suburban houses on Long Island for prosperous clients, but the onset of the Great Depression and World War II changed the housing industry. Planners anticipated a housing crisis of enormous proportions after the war, a situation worse than that which had occurred after the Great War because of more than a decade of economic depression before the economy rebounded under the stimulus of wartime spending. Meeting the challenge would require innovation: the building industry was wallowing in traditional methods of constructing houses at a time when mass production had brought consumer goods such as cars and refrigerators into the lives of middle- and working-class Americans.⁵ Learning from community builders in California who pioneered in the mass production of housing,⁶ and taking advantage of federal initiatives such as the G.I. Bill and other mortgage subsidies, the Levitts revolutionized the industry. The company divided construction into twenty-seven different operations, from bulldozing the site and laying a concrete slab foundation to framing the walls and roof to plumbing and electrical work. Precut lumber and other materials arrived at each construction site as needed, and crews of specialized workers moved from site to

site repeating the same task, a variation on the assembly line Henry Ford introduced in the production of the Model T. Contemporary critics noted the parallel: Eric Larrabee, for example, described the typical Levitt house as the "Model-T equivalent of the rose-covered cottage"; *Time* described William Levitt as the "Henry Ford of Housing"; and a writer in *Fortune* marveled at the efficient, factory-like precision of the production process.⁷ The Levitts economized not only by building in vast numbers but also through a vertical integration of the industry: their mills produced the lumber, they made their own nails, and they bought fixtures and appliances in such incredible numbers that they were able to eliminate markups and reflect those savings in the prices of the houses they sold.

Sell houses they did. At the first Levittown, in Island Trees, Long Island, the Levitts built 17,500 houses between 1947 and 1951. As was the case in Philip Klutznick's new community of Park Forest, Illinois, the subject of William H. Whyte's *Organization Man*, the initial residents of Levittown were veterans who rented, but within two years the Levitts were selling houses as fast as they could produce them and garnering national publicity. William J. Levitt appeared on the cover of *Time* in 1950, and the following year the company began assembling land for a second large-scale development in eastern Pennsylvania. As historian Barbara Kelly has observed, "the Levitt house was the reduction of the American Dream to an affordable reality, made possible in large part by the cooperative efforts of the government, the builders, and the banks."⁸ What made Bucks County especially attractive was twofold: the construction of U. S. Steel's Fairless Works near the site and its proximity to population centers Philadelphia and Trenton. By mid-1951 Levitt had assembled approximately nine square miles of land and embraced the opportunity to create a new community. "Levittown, Pa. will be the least monotonous mass housing group ever planned in America," Bill Levitt promised in announcing the plans for the project.⁹

Levittown, Pa.—Building the Suburban Dream is an intelligent, well-researched, and rewarding examination of the world the Levitts created and the lives the suburbanites made. The first part of the exhibit, "Planning, Building and Selling Levittown," provides a clear sense of the sheer scale of the Levitts' operations and the innovations that made a Levittown house affordable. Curator Curtis Miner demonstrates that Levittown, Pennsylvania fully merits its claim to being a comprehensively designed community. It boasts of a hierarchical street system, with parkways or boulevards that provide for major traffic, streets that extend from the parkways around each of

the forty neighborhoods, which are called drives, and narrower, gently curving roads within the neighborhoods called lanes. The neighborhoods Alfred Levitt designed have clearly defined boundaries and are organized around a school, a precept in American town planning that extends back to Clarence Perry's conceptualization of the Neighborhood Unit as part of the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs (1921-31).¹⁰ There are also community swimming pools, neighborhood parks, baseball fields, churches, a town hall, and a Shop-a-Rama shopping center that is now closed and, in a kind of metaphor for the evolution of suburban retail, being converted into a Home Depot. The second part of the exhibit, "The Suburban Way," probes the lives of residents, the changing uses of leisure, and the remarkable world of Little League games and children at the height of the baby boom. A third part of the exhibit, an original kitchen from a Jubilee model house in the Highland Park section of Levittown, is a telling evocation of the material world of modern appliances and the streamlined appearance residents cherished.

The only significant shortcoming of the exhibit is the space devoted to it. At present the State Museum has woefully inadequate areas for changing exhibits. *Levittown, Pa.—Building the Suburban Dream* is squeezed into the wings of Memorial Hall. The south wing tells the story of the construction of the community. The visitor then proceeds into a hallway devoted to Pennsylvania furniture, where the Levittown kitchen is located, as is a related exhibit on Daisy Myers and the integration of the community. The visitor then has to double back or wander through Memorial Hall to see the second part of the exhibit, how people lived in Levittown and the community they made, in the north wing. This exhibit is simply too important for the space allocated to it.

As Curtis Miner demonstrates, the development of Levittown, Pennsylvania was a major event that attracted widespread media coverage and critical scrutiny. The Levittowns and similar large-scale suburban communities quickly became the target of sociological studies and cultural criticism for promoting conformity. The urbanist and social critic Lewis Mumford, for example, described the Bucks County Levittown as a social failure, a vast yet homogeneous community, "too congested for effective variety and too spread out for social relationships." William H. Whyte characterized residents of the "new package suburbs" as transients, interchangeable cogs in the engine of corporate America. John Keats, author of the best-selling critique of suburbia, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, described the new suburbs as "fresh-air slums." In a place such as Levittown, he asserted, "you can be certain all other

houses will be precisely like yours, inhabited by people whose age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversation, dress, possessions, and perhaps even blood type are precisely like yours."¹¹ Malvina Reynolds' popular song "Little Boxes," which Pete Seeger made famous, may have been written to deride the tract housing going up on the hillsides overlooking San Francisco Bay in Daly City, California, but it captured what the critics found so regrettable about Levittown: that the standardized houses were producing standardized persons with standardized views and standardized children.

The culture critics' emphasis on conformity is, in retrospect, understandable: photographs of each of the Levittowns show a small number of house types, four in Bucks County, extending as far as the eye can see. Photographs of the men who commuted to work from places such as Park Forest and Levittown similarly suggest conformity: almost everyone is dressed in white shirts, ties, and jackets, and the hat is an omnipresent article of male clothing. In short, the houses looked alike, the men looked alike, an astonishingly high percentage of the women were pregnant at any given time in the 1950s; even ages and income levels in Levittown were similar. Everyone had moved from someplace else, and most suburbanites—William H. Whyte's Organization Man and his spouse—engaged in a host of community activities, many organized around children, and sank roots into the Levittown soil.¹²

And yet residents didn't judge their lives in the same way the culture critics did. Harry Henderson reported that residents of the instant bedroom communities rarely complained about the similarity of the houses. He quoted a college graduate and mother of two children who told him: "We're not peas in a pod." She conceded that she had anticipated this would be the case when the family moved to Levittown, especially because income levels were so similar. "But it's amazing how different and varied people are, likes and dislikes, attitudes and wants. I never really knew what people were like until I came here."¹³ There is ample anecdotal evidence which suggests that many residents felt the same as did the mother of two. Marvin Bressler, a sociologist at Princeton who lived in Levittown, dismissed critics who described Levittown as "standardized and boring and nonintellectual." Levittown was affordable housing that attracted a new economic cohort to suburbia, and it was, for them, "a symbol of middle-class attainment."¹⁴ Pancho Micir, the son of a Croatian immigrant father who had worked in the steel mills of Pittsburgh until moving to Levittown to work at the Fairless plant, recalled that the

Levittown of his youth was highly diverse, at least among white ethnics: he encountered "different nationalities," different cultural traditions and values, and a wide range of religious beliefs. Approximately 15 percent of Levittown's population was Jewish, three times the national average, and large numbers of ethnic Catholics lived there as well.¹⁵

Perhaps the most convincing demonstration of individuality amid a landscape of conformity is the degree to which residents transformed identical tract houses into homes. Just as residents of Island Trees made Levitt's mass produced houses into dwellings that met their spatial needs and expressed their tastes,¹⁶ so did residents of Pennsylvania's Levittown place their personal and familial stamp on their homes. Carports became garages or rooms, additions extended the Cape Cod (known as the Rancher) and the Levittowner in remarkably creative directions, new windows replaced the aluminum frames of the original Levitt editions, and in countless ways—from vinyl siding or new brick fronts (in place of asbestos shingles) to much enlarged porches to awnings, sheds, and landscape features—residents have expressed their individuality in their homes. Indeed, what Herbert J. Gans wrote of the third Levittown, in Willingboro, New Jersey, is undoubtedly true of Levittown, Pennsylvania: "Levittowners have not become outgoing, mindless conformers; they remain individuals, fulfilling the social aspirations with which they came."¹⁷

Unfortunately, in Levittown the diversity Pancho Micir and other residents remember was limited to white ethnics. Following federal housing policy, on Long Island the Levitts added restrictive covenants to deeds that excluded African Americans. Although the Supreme Court outlawed such covenants in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), historian Arnold Hirsch has demonstrated that the Federal Housing Administration was reluctant to take steps to enforce nondiscrimination regulations and instead chose to maintain segregation, a policy that "manifested itself most clearly in its kid-glove handling of various Levittown developments."¹⁸ William Levitt explained the firm's continuing resistance to integration: "if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 to 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community." To those who pleaded for a more inclusive policy he added, "we can solve a housing problem or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two."¹⁹ Although the Levitts' behavior reflected that of most builders, Harry Henderson's conversations with residents of the first Levittown and other new suburbs led to a different conclusion: "nearly all agree that if Negroes had been accepted from the first," he reported, "there

would have been no problem." Instead, the first two Levittowns became the largest segregated communities in the United States.²⁰ When the Island Trees Levittown turned 50 in 1997, Kenneth T. Jackson reflected on its early years and described Levitt's decision not to sell houses to African Americans as "an opportunity tragically lost." "There was such a demand for houses—they had people waiting on lines—that even if they had said there will be some blacks living there, white people would still have moved in."²¹

Pennsylvania's Levittown, like its predecessor on Long Island, was segregated: the Levitts simply refused to sell houses to African Americans. In August 1957, however, William and Daisy Myers purchased a house in Dogwood Hollow from the initial owner. What followed was a nightmare covered in the national media: the first night a rock shattered the picture window, and over the next several days crowds of angry whites milled about the house expressing outrage at the presence of an African American family living in their midst. A group of citizens organized the Levittown Betterment Committee to oppose the integration of their community, and that organization sought the aid of the Ku Klux Klan to drive the Myers family out of town. Next-door neighbor Lewis Wechsler's house had KKK painted on it, someone burned a five foot cross on his lawn, and a Confederate flag hung from the vacant house directly behind the Myers home. Some friends and neighbors stood with the Myers family, and two months after the harassment began the state Attorney General obtained an injunction against the leaders of the opposition. Daisy Myers recently recalled, "We hadn't taken fully into account—the prejudices of so many Americans—those silly enough to let skin color cause them to reject other human beings." The "housing market" drew her special attention as "a symbol of racial inequality."²² *The Daisy Myers Story*, a companion exhibit to *Levittown, Pa.—Building the Suburban Dream*, vividly tells the story of resistance to integration and the Myers family's determination to live in a Levittown house that met their needs. Of special note is a powerful videotaped interview in which Mrs. Myers describes the events that took place in 1957 and her hope for a society that respects the rights of all individuals regardless of color. But the legacy of bias persisted over the next forty-five years. A postscript to *The Daisy Myers Story* notes that African Americans represent only 2.4 percent of Levittown's population.

Collectively, these exhibits bring the story of Levittown, Pennsylvania into the mainstream of recent American history. *Levittown, Pa.—Building the Suburban Dream* challenges the stereotypes of a society of belongers and conformists in the mass-produced suburbs and recreates the pattern of daily

activities in a community that revolved around child-rearing. *The Daisy Myers Story* adds a terrific dimension to the Levittown exhibit, a haunting reminder of how segregated Northern communities were in the 1950s and the long-term consequences of public policies that failed to enforce federal nondiscrimination legislation. American society is still living with the consequences of those decisions.

NOTES

1. Jeff Speck, "A Successful Community That Opened Door to Sprawl," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 11, 2002. Speck acknowledged that the communities the Levitts built were more successful than most recently constructed suburbs. See also Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000).
2. Chad M. Kimmel, "Revisiting Levittown, Pennsylvania: Changes Within a Postwar Planned Community," *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 18, no. 2 (2001): 89–96. What Kimmel describes was apparently common to large-scale suburban communities in the post-World War II years. According to Harry Henderson, "Except for Park Forest, none of the new communities I visited was incorporated, and none had its own local government." See Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs, Part II: Rugged American Collectivism," *Harper's* 207 (Dec. 1953): 85.
3. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
4. Conn, "Bold Experiment in Way We Live is Social Failure," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 11, 2002.
5. "The Industry Capitalism Forgot," *Fortune* 36 (Aug. 1947): 61ff.
6. For antecedents of Levitt's innovations see Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth Century Metropolis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
7. Eric Larrabee, "The Six Thousand Houses That Levitt Built," *Harper's* 197 (Sept. 1948): 79–88; "Up from the Potato Fields," *Time* 56 (July 3, 1950); "The Industry Capitalism Forgot." See also Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
8. Barbara M. Kelly, "Learning From Levittown," *The Long Island Historical Journal* 1 (Fall 1988): 39.
9. Levitt, quoted in Curtis Miner, "Picture Window Paradise," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 28 (Spring 2002): 15.
10. See Eugenie L. Birch, "Five Generations of the Garden City: Tracing Howard's Legacy in Twentieth-Century Residential Planning," in *From Garden City to Green City: The Legacy of Ebenezer Howard*, ed. Kermit C. Parsons and David Schuyler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 173. See also Perry's volume, *Neighborhood and Community Planning* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs, 1929).
11. William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 267–98 (quotation 280); Mumford is quoted in Penn Kimball, "'Dream Town'—Large Economy Size," *New York*

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- Times Magazine*, Dec. 14, 1952, 42; Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 7.
12. Whyte, Jr., *Organization Man*, 280–98; Nicholas Lemann, "Naperville: Stressed Out in Suburbia," *Atlantic* 264 (Nov. 1989): 34–48.
13. Harry Henderson, "The Mass Produced Suburbs: I. How People Live in America's Newest Towns," *Harper's* 207 (Nov. 1953): 26. Henderson took a more critical stance in "The Mass-Produced Suburbs, Part II: Rugged American Collectivism," 80–86.
14. Bressler is quoted in Kathy Boccella, "At 40, Levittown thrives—and confounds critics," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 9, 1991.
15. Micir is quoted in David Diamond, "The Children of Levittown," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 12, 1982. Harry Henderson reported that almost 50 percent of the residents of the Island Trees Levittown were Catholic. Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs, Part II: Rugged American Collectivism," 82.
16. Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
17. Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 154.
18. Arnold R. Hirsch, "Choosing Segregation: Federal Housing Policy Between *Shelley* and *Brown*," in John F. Bauman, et al., *From Tenements to the Taylor Homes: In Search of an Urban Housing Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 213.
19. Levitt, quoted in C. Thompson, "Growing Pains of a Brand-new City," *Saturday Evening Post*, Aug. 7, 1954, 26–27.
20. Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs, Part II: Rugged American Collectivism," 85.
21. Jackson is quoted in Bruce Lambert, "At 50, Levittown Contends With Its Legacy of Bias," *New York Times*, Dec. 28, 1997.
22. Daisy Myers with context by Linda Shopes, "Breaking Down Barriers," *Pennsylvania Heritage* 28 (Summer 2002): 12, 10. See also Marvin Bressler, "The Myers Case: An Instance of Successful Racial Invasion," *Social Problems* 8 (Fall 1960): 127–42. For examples of the national attention Levittown received see "Segregation: A Family Moves In," *Newsweek*, Aug. 26, 1957, p. 27; "Integration Troubles Beset Northern Town," *Life*, Sept. 2, 1957, 43–46; "House for Sale," *Time*, Sept. 9, 1957; Brian R. Bittan, "Ordeal in Levittown," *Look*, Aug. 19, 1958; "Race Trouble in the North—When A Negro Family Moved Into a White Community," *U.S. News & World Report*, Aug. 30, 1958.