

Up from the Potato Fields (1950)

Following World War II, returning military veterans and their families fueled an unprecedented demand for affordable housing. To meet this demand, the federal government and private industry collaborated in creating residential suburbs throughout America during the late 1940s and the 1950s. One of the first builders to take advantage of this informal partnership was William Levitt, often credited with being the father of modern suburbia.

From "Up from the Potato Fields," Time (3 July 1950):67-69, 72. Reprinted by permission.

In 1,200 flat acres of potato farmland near Hicksville, Long Island, an army of trucks sped over new-laid roads. Every 100 feet, the trucks stopped and dumped identical bundles of lumber, pipes, bricks, shingles and copper tubing—nearly as neatly packaged as loaves from a bakery. Near the bundles, giant machines with an endless chain of buckets ate into the earth, taking just 13 minutes to dig a narrow, four-foot trench around a 25-by-32 ft. rectangle. Then came more trucks, loaded with cement, and laid a four-inch foundation for a house in the rectangle.

After the machines came the men. On nearby slabs already dry, they worked in crews of two and three, laying bricks, raising studs, nailing lath, painting, sheathing, shingling. Each crew did its special job, then hurried on to the next site. Under the skilled combination of men & machines, new houses rose faster than Jack ever built them; a new one was finished every 15 minutes.

Three years ago, little potatoes had sprouted from these fields. Now there were 10,600 houses inhabited by more than 40,000 people, a community almost as big as 96-year-old Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Plainfield, N.J., or Chelsea, Mass. Its name: Levittown. Levittown is known largely for one reason: it epitomizes the revolution which has brought mass production to the housing industry. Its creator, Long Island's Levitt & Sons, Inc., has become the biggest builder of houses in the U.S.

Super-Selling. The houses in Levittown, which sell for a uniform price of \$7,990, cannot be mistaken for castles. Each has a sharp-angled roof and a picture window, radiant heating in the floor, 12-by-16 ft. living room, bath, kitchen, two bedrooms on the first floor, and an "expansion attic" which can be converted into two more bedrooms and bath. The kitchen has a refrigerator, stove and Bendix washer; the living room a fireplace and a built-in Admiral television set.

The Great Change. To a man, Bill Levitt and all the other builders know exactly whom to thank for the boom and the steadily expanding market. Said one San Francisco builder last week: "If it weren't for the Government, the boom would end overnight."

At war's end, when the U.S. desperately needed 5,000,000 houses, the nation had two choices: the Federal Government could try to build the houses itself, or it could pave the way for private industry to do the job, by making available billions in credit. The U.S. wisely handed the job to private industry, got 4,000,000 new units built since the war, probably faster and cheaper than could have been done any other way.

The Government has actually spent little cash itself. But by insuring loans up to 95% of the value of a house, the Federal Housing Administration made it easy for a builder to borrow the money with which to build low-cost houses. The Government made it just as easy for the buyer by liberally insuring his mortgage. Under a new housing act signed three months ago, the purchase terms on low-cost houses with Government-guaranteed mortgages were so liberalized that in many cases buying a house is now as easy as renting it. The new terms: 5% down (nothing down for veterans) and 30 years to pay. Thus an ex-G.I. could buy a Levitt house with no down payment and installments of \$56 a month.

The countless new housing projects made possible by this financial easy street are changing the way of life of millions of U.S. citizens, who are [realizing for the first time the great American dream of owning their own home. No longer must young married couples plan to start living in an [apartment, saving for the distant day when they lean buy a house. Now they can do it more easily than they can buy a \$2,000 car on the installment plan.

Fountain of Youth. Like its counterparts across the land, Levittown is an entirely new kind of community. Despite its size, it is not incorporated, thus has no mayor, no police force, nor any of the other traditional city officers of its own. It has no movies, no nightclubs and only three bars (all in the community shopping centers).

And Levittown has very few old people. Few of its more than 40,000 residents are past 35; of some 8,000 children, scarcely 900 are more than eleven years old. In front of almost every house along Levittown's 100 miles of winding streets hits a tricycle or a baby carriage. In Levittown, activity stops from 12 to 2 in the afternoon; that is nap time. Said one Levittowner last week, "Everyone is so young that sometimes it's hard to remember how to get along with older people."

The community has an almost antiseptic air. Levittown streets, which have such fanciful names Satellite, Horizon, Haymaker, are bare and flat as hospital corridors. Life as a hospital, Levittown has designed all its own. Fences are not allowed (though here & there a home-owner has broken the rule), the plot of grass around each house must be cut at least once a week; if not, Bill Levitt's men mow the grass and send the bill. Wash cannot be hung out to dry on an ordinary clothesline; it must be arranged on rotary, removable drying racks and then not on weekends or on holidays.

There are perquisites as well as rules. For the young children there are parks and countless playgrounds. For the old folks (the 5- to 35-year-olds) there are baseball diamonds, handball courts, six huge 75-by-125 ft. swimming pools, plus 25-by-75 ft. kiddie pools, shopping centers and 60-odd fraternal clubs and veterans' organizations.

"The Old Freeze." Actually, Levittown's uniformity is more apparent than real. Though most of the incomes are about the same (average: about \$3,800), Levittowners come from all classes, all walks of life. Eighty percent of the men commute to their jobs in Manhattan, many sharing their transportation costs through car pools. Their jobs, as in any other big community, range from baking to banking, from teaching to preaching. Levittown has also developed its own unique way of keeping up with the Joneses. Some Levittowners buy a new house every year, as soon as the new model is on the market. . . .

How Long? By 1951 Levitt & Sons expect to build another 10,000 Levittown houses. But whether the Levitts, or all of the other builders, will build as many houses as they plan depends on how long the housing shortage — and the housing boom — lasts.

Last week, the Department of Commerce estimated that about two-thirds of the pent-up housing demand has already been filled. However, said the department, the "remaining backlog is still large and appears to be sufficient to warrant construction close to the recent yearly rates for [another]¹ three years."

That seemed a conservative prediction, if the big builders like Levitt could keep on thinking up new mass-production tricks, and small merchant builders could adapt more of them to their operations, thus broadening the market for small, cheap houses. By stabilizing the construction industry, builders could offer more permanent work to labor, and thus eliminate the cause of the featherbedding that now adds so much to building costs. And as efficiency increased, the mass builders might also find they could economically supply some of the individuality that their houses now lack.

¹ Editorial insertion.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. From the perspective of this article, what seems most amazing about the development of suburbs? What role did the government play in making suburbs possible?
2. Suburbs were supposed to provide former city dwellers with greater "freedom." Does this article support that contention? Explain your response.
3. Think about the neighborhood you grew up in. Was it like Levittown? Why or why not?