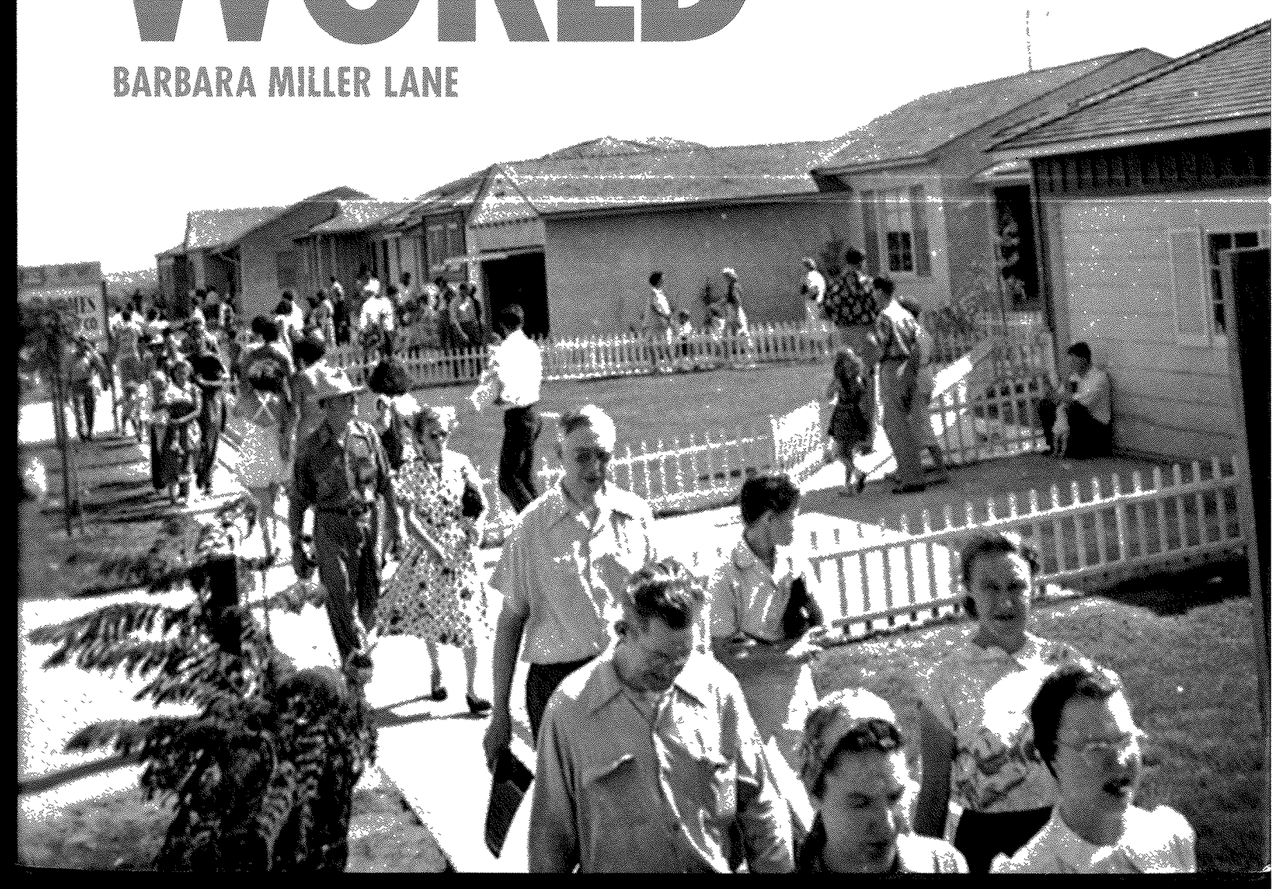
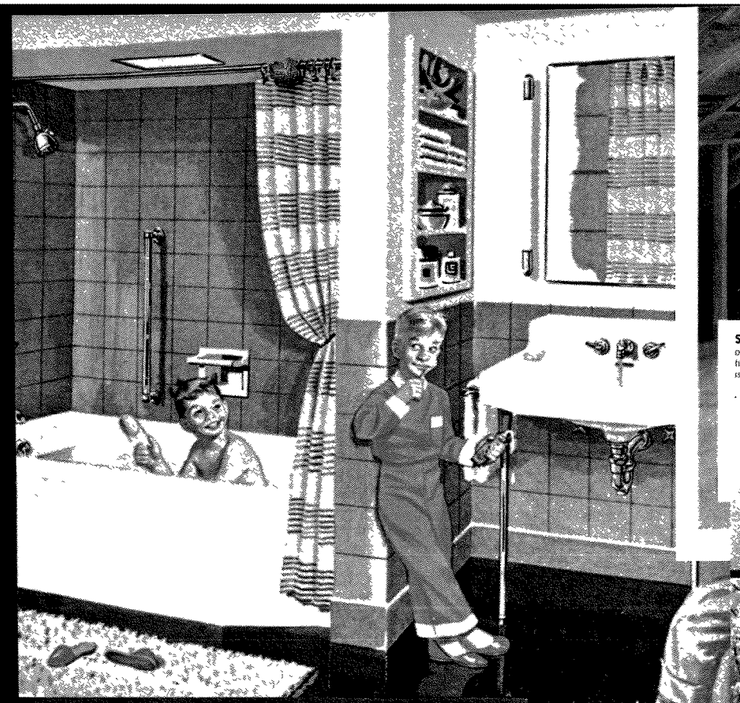
HOUSES FOR A NEW WORLD

BUILDERS AND BUYERS IN AMERICAN SUBURBS 1945–1965

BARBARA MILLER LANE





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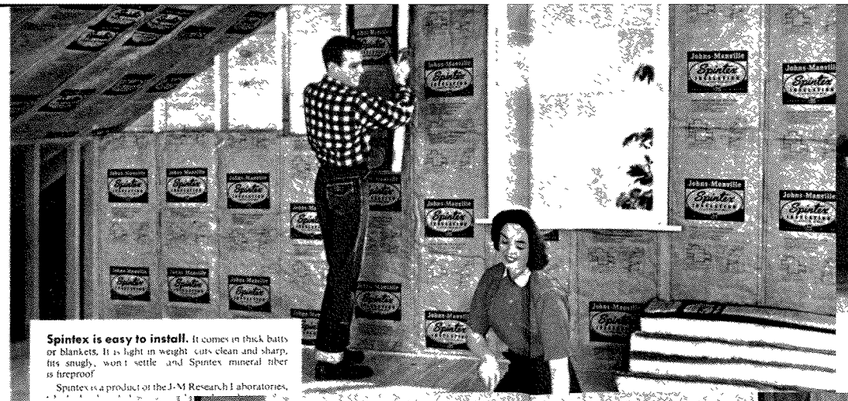

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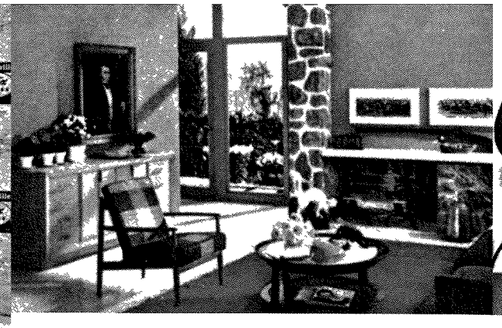

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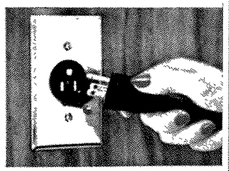

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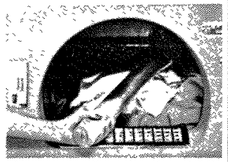

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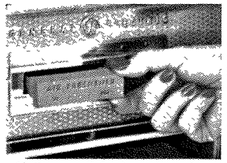

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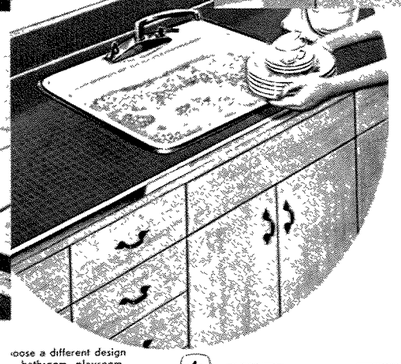

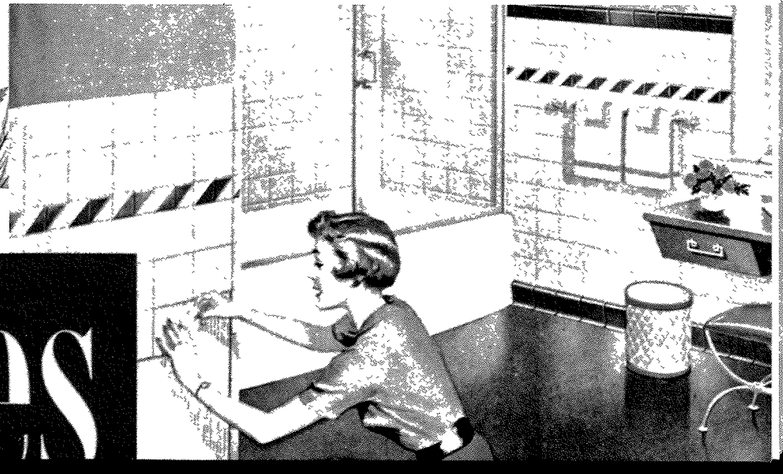

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HOUSES FOR A NEW WORLD

BUILDERS AND BUYERS IN AMERICAN SUBURBS, 1945–1965

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PROLOGUE

The following passages are distilled from interviews with original buyers of builders' houses and combined as a single voice.[1] The buyers, as they speak here, are reporting their thoughts about their houses soon after they first moved in:

> The house was new, our family had never had a new house before. And it was new to us: we had come a distance to live there, and left our earlier families and neighborhoods behind. It was all new: bright new paint and floors, a shiny kitchen and bathroom with new kinds of machines and fixtures, lots of light inside with big windows looking out front and back, a bedroom for each kid or pair of kids, easy to move around in. A garage, for the new family car. It seemed new in another way too: it seemed right for a whole new time.
>
> Outside, there were front and back yards where the kids could run free. Of course you had to get to know the neighbors from scratch, because everyone was from somewhere else. But that didn't take long, and the place was paradise for kids. It was paradise for us, too: owning our own house and yard for the first time. The house was about 1,000 square feet, a lot roomier than the place we'd been living before, and roomier than the places we grew up in too. Or at least it was less crowded. There were hardly any stairs to climb; everything was neat and tidy and within reach. It was really "modern" in every way: up-to-date, sleek-looking, efficient, light and airy, but cozy at the same time. It seemed bigger, too, because of the yards. Maybe thirty feet in the front and fifty in the back: you could sit out both places, grow some vegetables and flowers in back, have a place, sometimes, to hang clothes. And the front yards seemed even bigger than they were, because the streets were so wide and quiet: the kids could play there. There was a park; soon there would be a new school and a shopping center.
>
> Sometimes the neighbors would come over for a barbecue in the backyard; sometimes there would be block parties on the street and in the front yards. The neighbors were pretty interesting: many of them weren't very much like us. They had different religions, different kinds of jobs, different upbringing, sometimes they came from far away places. But they were about the same age, they had about the same number of kids, and they wanted to make a decent life in the new place, for themselves and the kids, like us. It was quite an adventure.

At the beginning, it was exciting seeing the new house being built: the whole family went over every weekend to watch. (The kids would play around on the building sites. They liked doing that later, too.) Afterward, we just kept on fixing it up. It was home for us. It was a big investment, of course, even with the FHA mortgage. But with luck, and hard work, it seemed like we could manage it. And then it would last—it would be a place for the kids to come back to.

CHAPTER 1

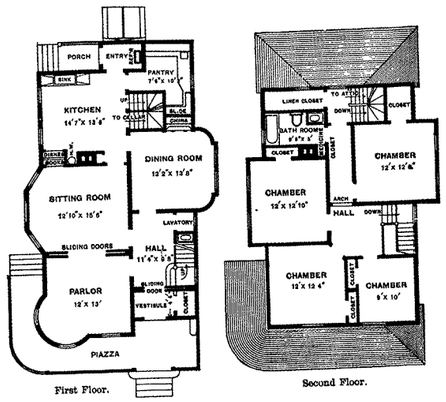
New Houses and New Communities

The recollections excerpted in the prologue describe the dominant "American Dream" of the 1940s and 1950s: homeownership for (practically) everyone who wanted it.[1] Ownership of a new, well-functioning little house and yard, and the opportunity to found a new way of life in a new place. These recollections come from people who bought houses during the first postwar years—that is, 1945 to 1960 or 1965. When prospective owners made their choices about where and how to live during these fifteen to twenty years, they selected among radically new dwelling designs. American house types, house plans, and housing environments were utterly transformed in this period. The transformation was achieved by "merchant builders," a new type of builder/developer. The builders of this era responded to the desires and preferences of the buyers, at the same time as they, the builders, helped to shape those preferences. In thousands of new suburban communities, a builder erected a few model houses, usually split-levels or ranches, and a family selected the one that suited its members. The new suburbs of these years were formed by the multiplication of these actions and choices.

This book examines these builders and buyers: the new house types they built during the first two decades after World War II, and the new communities that the houses formed. More than thirteen million of these predominantly ranch and split-level houses were constructed after the war, on large "tracts" or

1. Visitors to model houses, Lakewood, CA, 1950. City of Lakewood.

entered into a period of rapid growth during and immediately after the war: new state highways were built during this period, and many metropolitan areas were soon encircled, or partially encircled, by "ring roads" that allowed automobiles to bypass direct routes through the city. At more or less the same time, vast systems of "freeways" (limited access expressways) connected cities with their hinterlands and with the new Interstate system. The "journey to work" changed profoundly: with an automobile, one could commute to work, relatively inexpensively, over great distances, especially during the early years of the highway system, when the roads were new and the traffic light. During the same period, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Veterans' Administration sponsored mortgages at rates that enabled millions of nuclear families to afford their own homes for the first time. Without new roads and cheap money, America's postwar

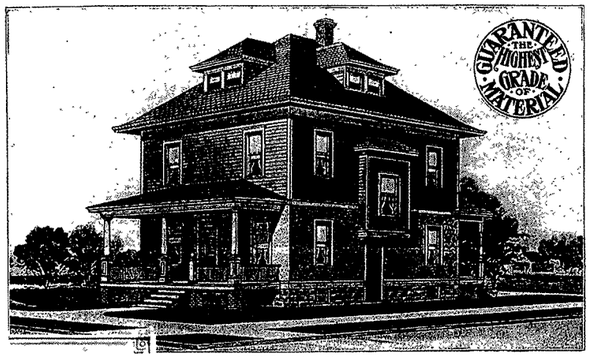


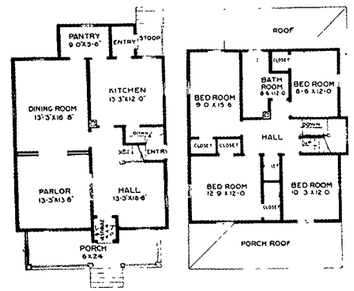
2. The George and J. P. Kingston House, Worcester, MA, ca. 1897, exterior. *Modern American Dwellings*, 49–51.

3. Kingston House, Worcester, MA, ca. 1897, *Modern American Dwellings*, plan.

suburbanization would never have happened. And behind these events, a subtler shift was occurring: prosperity for the working classes, already high during the intense productivity of wartime, continued to increase for many years after World War II. Prosperity, new roads, cheap money, and the availability of inexpensive single-family dwellings made possible the creation of a new suburban society, transforming the American built environment. But history is made by individuals, and so it was the decisions and choices of builders and buyers that so dramatically transformed the character of American houses and streets.

The new house designs, in addition to being smaller than the ideal houses of the American past, were different in elevation, profile, plan, and interior furnishing. An ideal middle-class house of fifty years earlier rose two or three stories high (figs. 2, 3, Kingston House). It sat on a deep lawn; one approached the house on a walkway to a generous porch. The porch provided an additional reception space before one entered the house.[7] Inside were an entrance foyer, a hall, and a number of separate and formal rooms: parlor, sitting room (sometimes called the "second parlor"), dining room, and kitchen on the ground floor, with four to six bedrooms on the upper floors, and a single bathroom on the second floor. There was no garage. With the first floor raised above ground level, the house did not encourage in any obvious way a relationship between interior and exterior. The house was separated from its neighbors by a fence or hedge. The overall visual impression given by such a building was of a vertical-oriented mass, freestanding, self-contained, and neither strongly related to its surrounding environment nor welcoming to passersby. Its interior plan, sometimes described as a "polite plan," was geared to formal reception and entertaining, with the more private





MODERN HOME No. 111

areas restricted to upper floors.[8] Its most public room, the parlor, was often lavishly decorated (fig. 4). These features appeared in the dwellings of relatively affluent buyers, as in figures 2 to 4, but also throughout the economic spectrum, as in Sears's "Modern Home No. 111" of 1908 (fig. 5).

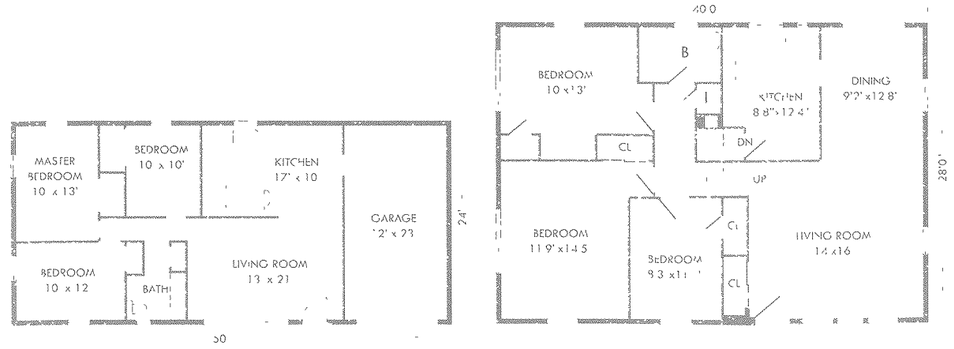
The typical tract house or development house of the 1940s and 1950s, in contrast, was much smaller. It was one or one and a half stories high, and followed the contours of the land on which it was built. It sat back from the street, but not as far back as many earlier houses of towns and suburbs. The entrance was not greatly emphasized, but the garage was prominent, and appeared, from the street, to offer the main access to the house (figs. 6, 7). Entry was directly into

4. Victorian Parlor, ca. 1891. English Heritage, National Monuments Record.

5. Sears Roebuck House, "The Chelsea," 1908, exterior and plan. *Sears Roebuck Modern Homes*, 30.

6 Campanelli Brothers, ranch house, Brockton, MA, ca 1960, exterior Photo by the author

7 Ralph Bodek, split-level house, Philadelphia area, exterior, ca 1956 Bodek, *How and Why*



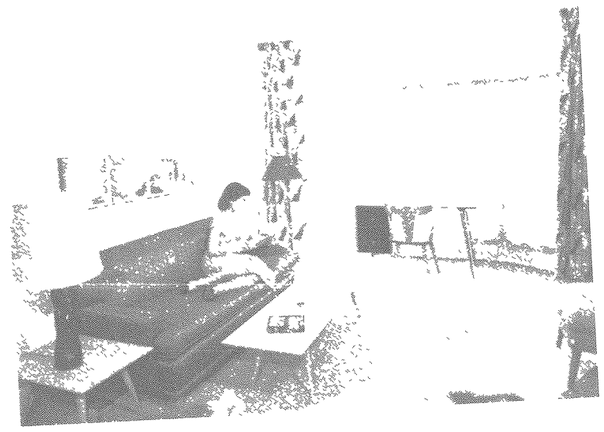
the "living room," the eating area was not fully separate (in fact it was often part of the kitchen), kitchens were large and open to other living areas (figs. 8, 11). The kitchen, no longer the domain of a household servant, formed a significant part of the living space of the house.[9] Bedrooms were separate only in the sense that they were located away from the living room (figs. 8, 9). A large "picture window" gave the living room a powerful connection to the street, and windows or sliding doors in the rear gave easy visual access to a deep interior back yard. Light flooded the interiors through these large windows. Interior finishes were sleek and shiny; furniture was sparse (sometimes built-in) and "modern-looking," appliances lavish for the time (figs. 10, 11, 12). With their bare surfaces, relative absence of historical references, and open and functional planning, the new houses corresponded in almost every way to what we now think of as "modern" (or "modernist") architecture. Gone were all the formal elements of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century domestic planning: the porch, the formal entry, the formal reception rooms. Gone was the air of self-sufficiency that is expressed in the exterior in figure 2. The new houses faced the street instead of turning away from it, and they were visually related to one another as a result of their siting. It is clear from plans and exterior views alone that these were houses for a new time and for a different lifestyle.

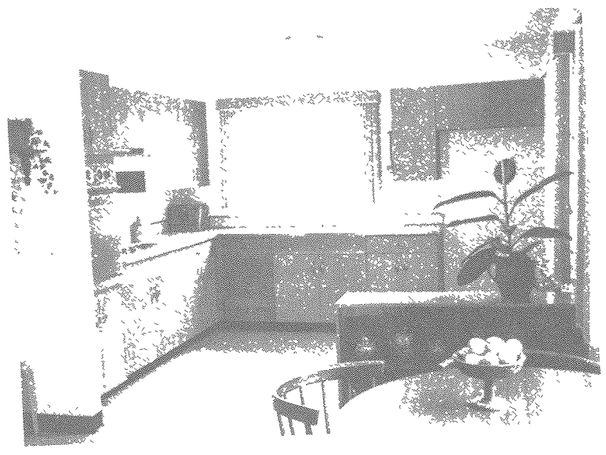
For an observer standing on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street, the houses, front yards, sidewalks, and, frequently, grass strips created a striking new pattern (fig. 13). The houses were close together: sometimes no more than twenty-five feet separated them. From some angles the houses looked almost connected. No fences or hedges divided the front yards,[10] and these contained little landscaping: usually low bushes around the base of the house, occasionally a tree next to the driveway. Front lawns, in the past visually an entryway to the house—a carpet flanking the walk leading to the entry—now appeared

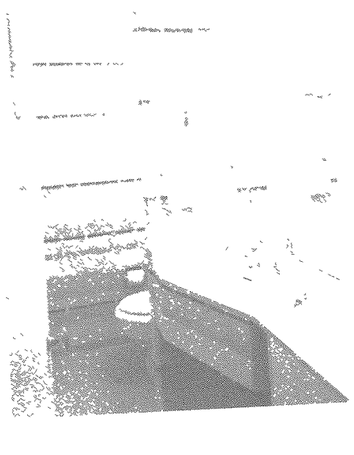
8 Campanelli Brothers, "The Crest," Brockton, MA, 1957, plan Restored by Nathanael Roesch from a newspaper advertisement of October 1958

9 Ralph Bodek, split level house, Lawrence Park, PA, ca 1955, plan Nathanael Roesch from a detailed plan in the Marple Township Zoning Office

almost continuous along the street, a parallel verge along streets and sidewalks, with a cross-pattern created by driveways rather than front walks. Grass strips between the sidewalk and the curb formed a further complementary pattern, punctuated by trees.[11] The large front windows invited the gaze of passersby. The streets themselves were relatively wide, compared to the local streets of earlier suburbs and small towns. Thus one's overall impression is of an exceptionally wide public way, composed of streets, grass strips, sidewalks, and lawns (fig. 14). At the same time, the low profiles of the houses create a sense of openness, of wide-open spaces. The whole ensemble gives an impression of order combined with greenery; it possesses both "rural" and "urban" qualities.



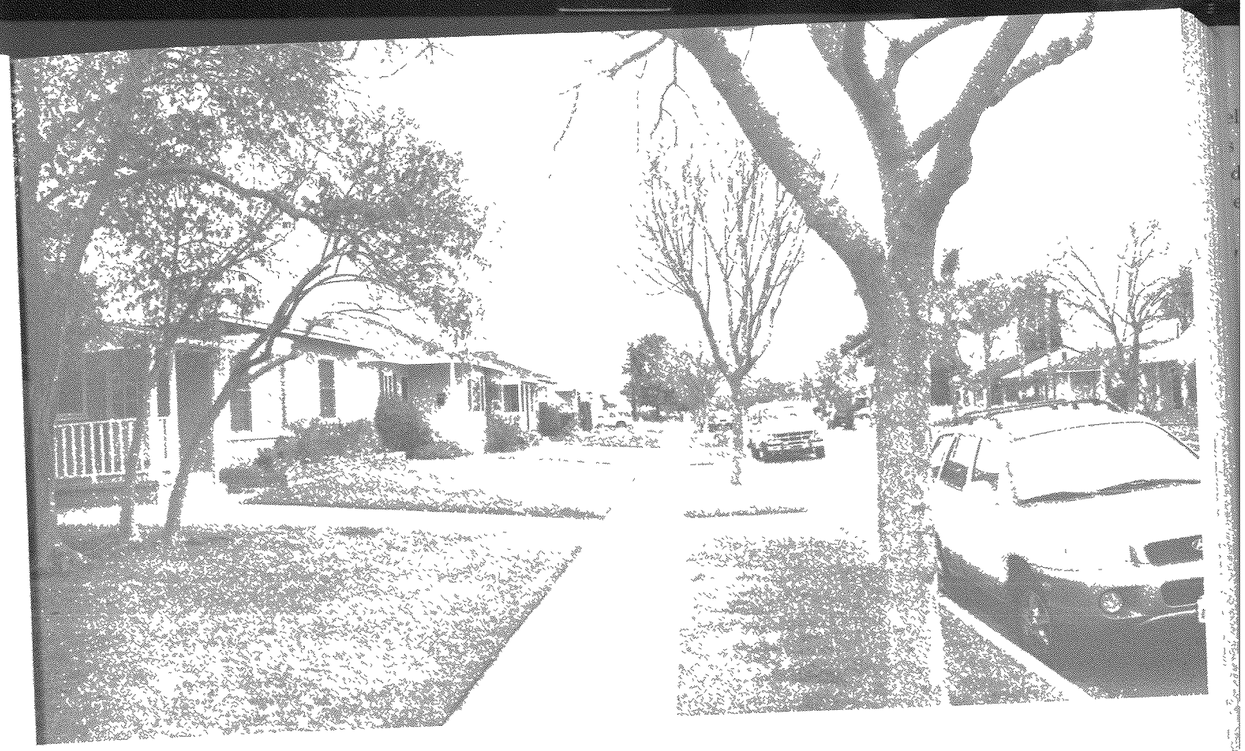




10 "Danish modern" furniture, Lakewood, CA, ca 1950
City of Lakewood

11 The "Moscow Kitchen," US Model House Exhibition, Moscow 1959 National Archives

12 H F Fischbach bathroom Harold Schwartz designer, 1954 Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress



13 Lakewood, CA, modern street view
Photo by the author

Back yards complemented the front by offering another continuous swath of greenery: there were few fences or hedges in the rear yards in the early years. Here the property was deeper—perhaps sixty feet—so there was room for planting trees and for some elaboration of recreation areas: a patio and sometimes a pool, or children's toys and play equipment. Many householders hung their laundry out to dry here as well, before the automatic dryer became a staple of household equipment. Vegetable and flower gardens (large and small) were also located at the rear. In having a relatively private recreation area in the rear, the tract houses of the first postwar decades were not very different from the suburban houses of the twenties, but the earlier suburban houses nearly always fenced the yard. The rear facades of the new houses were different from the front– they were much less elaborated. Back yards were above all the domain of small children and barbecues; their much-advertised "patios" were often merely small concrete slabs outside the back door (figs. 15, 16, 161).[12]

The distance of the houses from the street varied greatly from place to place and from region to region (they were much shallower in Los Angeles, much deeper in Massachusetts), but these distances were uniform within each community. Together with the consistent orientation of the new houses—facing the street—uniform setbacks heightened the sense of horizontality along streets

14 Slotzner Builders, Greenview subdivision, Arlington Heights, IL modern street view Photo by Jonathan Lane

and sidewalks. Of course the siting of the houses, together with their similarities of design, led to a somewhat repetitious appearance, prompting the scorn of contemporary hostile critics. Yet a curving street reduces this impression; many builders said that this motivated their street planning. Builders also worked against the appearance of uniformity by reversing plans from side to side and by varying exterior materials and colors. Sometimes, too, they alternated larger and smaller models, and interspersed ranches and splits. Buyers also chose to vary their houses by materials, colors, and additions, although they proved very reluctant to alter roofs and street facades.

The origins of street and lot layout were complex. They were the work of builders and their engineers, but they were also strongly affected by local traditions and regulations. Local zoning ordinances based on local traditions lie behind the wide streets, grass strips with trees, and uniform setbacks that created the new kinds of spaces characteristic of the new developments. These ordinances functioned sometimes at the county level (as in Los Angeles County, Orange County, and Chicago's Cook County), and sometimes at the most local level (as in Natick, MA, or Broomall, PA). Builders and their engineers negotiated lot sizes with local zoning boards, and sometimes they resisted local requirements about the provision of public space. But they had to bow to local ordinances

on setbacks, sidewalks, street width, curbs, paving, sewers, street lighting, and road construction, and the builder was normally responsible for providing these kinds of infrastructure. On the other hand, street patterns, the overall layout of a subdivision or group of subdivisions, and the positioning of the houses (within the limits of setback ordinances) came from the builder and engineer. These features too, though, were sometimes the subject of negotiation, especially when the local officials accepted the suggestions of the FHA about neighborhood and subdivision planning. Builders (and their engineers) succeeded rather often in negotiating changes in land use policy, at several levels of government.

In many cases, a new tract house development was advertised, and perceived, as the core of a "new city." The overall arrangement of streets in some of the larger developments conformed to new or quite recent neighborhood planning practices, popularized by the FHA. Even when this was not the case, streets were often curvilinear, differentiating the subdivision from surrounding grids. The resulting street views are different from those to be found in small towns, earlier suburbs, or prewar American cities. In plan and form, in relationship to one another and to the street and the larger community, the new houses marked a revolutionary break from the past.

Plans of the new subdivisions varied according to the ideas of the builders and their engineers, but the size of the subdivision itself was also critical. Such giant developments as the Levittowns, Lakewood, California, and Park Forest, Illinois, could be conceived as whole cities in themselves. Because many readers are familiar with Lakewood and the Levittowns, and because many contemporaries were impressed by Park Forest, I make comparisons between the builders I focus on, and the houses and plans of these three large places. Among the communities discussed in the following chapters, Panorama City, Rossmoor, Lawrence Park, Rolling Meadows, Elk Grove Village, and Weathersfield at

15 Torrance CA, children with pool in backyard of ranch house, 1955 Mrs FC

16 Five year old boy dressed for Easter, Campanelli ranch house, Natick, 1957 Mr LT

17 Fritz Burns, Westchester area, Los Angeles, ca. 1948, modern street view. Photo by Jonathan Lane

Schaumburg were large enough to be based on overall plans; these plans incorporated common open spaces, and sites for schools. In addition, the engineers who designed these new developments strongly preferred curvilinear street patterns (figs. 17, 136, 137, and others). Together with the engineers, the builders also planned for, or hoped for, the construction of a nearby shopping center; and most also believed that new communities required a new industrial base. But the builders of this era seldom controlled enough land or financial resources actually to include new industry in their planned communities.

The larger among the new tract house communities (twelve hundred to four thousand houses) were built on land acquired from large farms or estates; each was surrounded by countryside at the start. The original inhabitants perceived themselves as residing within a "greenbelt," a planning idea that had been dear to the hearts of American (and European) garden city theorists. Yet there were no real, legally protected greenbelts; just the rather rural-appearing surroundings. As the building boom moved on, as the demand for new housing continued, each of these "new towns" was soon surrounded by smaller developments built by other builders. In some cases, in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Orange County, the smaller builders laid down new grid plans, following the pattern of the older urban core: plans that rarely meshed with those of the communities they

surrounded. Outside Boston and Philadelphia, smaller builders developed their own curvilinear patterns, which of course did not "fit" those of the larger communities, and did not create a sense of continuity either. Quite soon, as the older lacunae were filled, each of these metropolitan centers was surrounded by areas that looked featureless to outsiders: this was the much-castigated "sprawl."

Despite the absence of real greenbelts, and despite variations in plan and size, there existed a surprising sense of common identity among the inhabitants of each new development. In the larger settlements, a sense of identity was conferred by shared schools and parks, by a common experience of street pattern and street life, by a shared history, and by shared homeowners' associations. Yet even the smaller developments display a sense of identity. Sometimes this sense came (and still comes) simply from the name of the development, which the residents remember and emphasize: "Westfield-at-Natick" is still the well-remembered name of one small community outside Boston. Sometimes a sense of identity came from the "brand name" of the houses ("Cinderella Homes" in Anaheim), sometimes from the reputation of the builders themselves ("Stoltzner-built" in Arlington Heights outside Chicago, "the Campi" on a website for Boston-area fans of Campanelli ranches). And the shared "look" of the houses themselves conferred a sense of identity: this may help to explain why, despite changing times and skyrocketing prices, additions and modifications to most of these houses have occurred at the rear, thus preserving the appearance of the street facades.

The Evolution of Ranch and Split-Level Houses

The houses built by tract developers can be described as having five different types, the first three rapidly outdistanced by the last two. The Levitt "Cape," or Cape Cod cottage, of 1947 (fig. 18) was a simple, tiny, box-like affair, with 750 square feet of living space,[11] on a 6,000-square-foot lot (0.14 acres). Two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen occupied the ground floor space; above was a partial attic that owners could remodel into an extra room or two, it was said. As in all the early postwar Levitt houses, the kitchen was located at the front, an innovation in house planning, but not one that most builders adopted. Built primarily for rental units, the Levitt Cape bore a strong resemblance to the schematic drawings of the "minimum house" published in the FHA handbooks from 1936 onward (see fig. 41).

The Levitts quickly turned to a different and more sophisticated house design, a modified Cape that they called a "ranch" (1949–50). The house again had the kitchen at the front, but so was the living room; in effect, the plan was that of their earlier Cape, rotated ninety degrees. This was the first house built