Levittown, the prototypical American suburb – a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 25

This postwar housing project's mass-produced homes still stand as something more complicated than a monument to the glory – or bland conformity – of the American dream

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People wait in line to view a new Levittown house on New York's Long Island. Photograph: B Anthony Stewart/National Geographic Creative/Corbis

Levittown isn't a single building but a development of more than 17,000 detached houses. The project – started in 1947 as America's prototypical postwar planned community – has outlived its heartiest supporters and harshest detractors to stand today as something more complicated than a monument to the glory of the American dream, or to the blandness and conformity to which that dream led.

Like so much else in 20th-century America, Levittown began as a shrewd business move. The homebuilding firm of Levitt and Sons had specialised in upper middle class dwellings on New York's Long Island before the second world war, only to be curtailed by the conflict's enormous consumption of construction resources.

But then the founder's son, William Levitt, came home from the navy with an idea: every young veteran returning to the United States would need a home. Couldn't the mass-production strategies he'd learned putting up military housing give it to them?

And so Levitt and Sons purchased a seven square mile tract of Long Island's potato and onion fields and got to work, putting up all of Levittown's residences between 1947 and 1951.

No one who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do
William Levitt

Famously building one house every 16 minutes at the construction's peak, using systems well-known in American automobile manufacturing but new to homebuilding. A variety of non-union subcontractors and "unskilled" workers moved from house to house, each performing one of 26 highly specialised steps in the overall assembly process – all using thoroughly standardised materials, all purchased directly from their manufacturers.

"We are not builders," said straight-talking Levitt, the operation's mastermind. "We are manufacturers." He even went so far as to declare his company "the General Motors of the housing industry", providing families the domestic component of the American dream, just as GM provided them the vehicular one. And they did so with the same aesthetic uniformity as the auto industry in its early years, initially stamping out house after house on the same architectural plan, drawn up by brother Alfred Levitt, albeit with subtle variations of colour, window treatment and roofline.

Construction of Levittown was famously quick: a home was built every 16 minutes. Photograph: Alamy

Even so, William Levitt called his product – which first sold for $7,990 with a 5% down payment (0% for veterans) and came with a built-in television set and hi-fi – "the best house in the US". But certain observers had grave reservations: Eric Larrabee in Harper's magazine called "the little Levitt house American suburbia reduced to its logical absurdity", and urban historian Lewis Mumford described the community they constituted as a "uniform environment from which escape is impossible".

Some sections of American society found entrance to the scheme impossible. For decades, Levittown's population was 100% white – at first because of covenants that restricted any minorities from buying in, and thus supposedly sending the surrounding home values into free-fall. "The community has an almost antiseptic air," said an otherwise admiring 1950 Time magazine profile of Levitt and Levittown. Brown v Board of Education and the nationwide racial integration that followed hardly touched Levittown, and even today its demographic profile still reads 94.15% white.

By 1950, when 80% of Levittown's men commuted to jobs in Manhattan, the development had set an example for countless American bedroom communities still to come. They provided settings to the novelists who got their start in the mid-20th century, some of whom would famously inveigh against their stifling social atmosphere. Richard Yates, whose novel Revolutionary Road offers a harrowing indictment of American life during Levittown's heyday, wrote of that era's "general lust for conformity", a "blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price, as exemplified politically in the Eisenhower administration and the McCarthy witch hunts".

Levitt, for his part, assured the McCarthyites that "no one who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do." Though he built inexpensive, fully functioning houses and built them well – the vast majority of them still stand today – Levitt left more or less everything else involved in the creation of Levittown to its new suburban homesteaders. Being American, after all, many of them set about customising their freshly built homes, whether of the standard utilitarian Cape Cod design or the newer models (Colonial, Rancher and Country Clubber) that followed.

By 1950, 80% percent of Levittown's male residents commuted to jobs in Manhattan. Photograph: Bettmann/Corbis

“Sure they were little boxes when we first started,” says the narrator of WD Wetherell’s short story The Man Who Loved Levittown. But “the minute we got our mitts on them we started remodelling them, adding stuff, changing them around”. He drifts into a rhapsodic recollection of “the 50s. The early 60s. We were all going the same direction … Thanks to Big Bill Levitt we all had a chance. You talk about dreams. Hell, we had ours. We had ours like nobody before or since ever had theirs. SEVEN THOUSAND BUCKS! ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS DOWN! We were cowboys out there. We were the pioneers.’”

But this proud Levitt owner, looking back on what seems like a quintessentially American exercise in individualism, also remembers that “there wasn’t anything we wouldn’t do for each other. Babysit, drive someone somewhere, maybe help out with a mortgage payment someone couldn’t meet.” Not only did the first generation of Levittown life have its communitarian aspects, it had actual regulations, such as Levitt’s insistence that no homeowner fence off a private yard from the shared green, that now seem at least faintly socialist.

Levittown’s very existence, in fact, owes to a rare act of American socialism: the 1948 Housing Bill, which loosened billions of dollars in credit and gave every American the chance to get one of those five-percent-down, 30-year mortgages in the first place. City-dwellers found that they could purchase their very own “modern” home just as easily as they could rent a walk-up apartment, and homebuilders like Levitt found themselves in a booming business servicing a seemingly insatiable demand.

This government-sponsored encouragement of suburban residence – which, to an extent, continues to this day – did its part to reduce American downtowns in the second half of the 20th century to little more than collections of office buildings. Levittown and its descendants (three of which Levitt himself built in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico, all of which he also named Levittown) lured a generation out of the cities. Their children grew up shaped by these secure and innovative if sometimes alienating environments – and went on themselves to raise the generation that has made a return, full-circle, to the city.