

Suburbia

As World War II ended, more than ten million soldiers were discharged from the U.S. armed forces. Where were they going to live? The answer, it turned out, was suburbia — 1950s style.

There were suburbs in America before the 1950s, but these were nothing like Levittown and its imitators. On 3 July 1950 developer William J. Levitt appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, standing in front of a row of identical boxlike houses on newly bulldozed land. The caption read: "HOUSE BUILDER LEVITT: For Sale: a new way of life." First on Long Island, then near Philadelphia, and finally in New Jersey, Levitt built his dream houses and in the process created the suburbia of the 1950s.

Levitt and his sons, who had built houses for the navy during World War II, brought mass production techniques to house building. The Levittown houses, built on concrete slabs with no basements, were nearly identical in floor plan although there were some slight variations in exteriors and color. The original designs had two bedrooms and one bathroom, and a family could expand the house by converting the attic or adding on. Lots were of uniform size (sixty by one hundred feet) with a tree planted every twenty-eight feet (two-and-a half trees per home). In the beginning the Levitt's included free televisions sets and a Bendix washing machine as incentives.



Aerial view of Levittown



An Orderly Neighborhood.

The early deeds to the Levitts' houses specified that no fences were to be built, lawns were to be mowed at least once a week in season, and laundry could be hung only on rotary racks, not on clotheslines, and never on weekends.

Housing Boom.

In 1950, 1.4 million new housing units were built, mostly in the suburbs. This rate continued throughout the 1950s, as an average of three thousand acres of farmland *per day* was bulldozed into tract housing. By 1952 Levittown's population (in Long Island) had jumped to ten thousand, and a second Levittown in Pennsylvania was built for seventeen thousand families. Block after block of identical houses dotted suburbia. Children quickly memorized the exact route to their homes, lest they get hopelessly lost among the similar structures.....

Soon shopping centers were built, followed by schools, libraries, movie theaters, restaurants, and churches — all in the same boxlike version of modern architecture.

The 1950s suburban communities tended to attract similar people: young, white, middle- class, and newly married. Blacks, Jews, and Hispanics were not welcome.

Suburban life was orderly and convenient, but also unreal and sterile. It produced harried husbands, bored wives, and alienated children.



An original Levitt kitchen



Levitt built 30 to 40 houses a day using an assembly line technique