INFLUENCES ON THE EARLY POST-WAR HOUSE

by

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(Under the Direction of John C. Waters)

ABSTRACT

The post World War II period that began in the late 1940's and ended in the mid 1960's has been lauded as the realization of the "American Dream" for the average American, and blamed for all of the ills plaguing citizens and local governments due to sprawl. The central figure in both situations is the post war house.

This work examines the economic, social and governmental influences that guided the design and construction of these houses. The examination is focused on the vernacular house type that evolved and referred to as Minimal Traditional Cottage. Recommendations are based on the analysis of the influences and their impact on preservation of these post war houses.

INDEX WORDS: Historic preservation, History, Post-war house, Minimal traditional cottage

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DEDICATION

In memory of my mother, Stella Mae Kobelak Kerr. She gave me a mother's love, discipline, and direction, but most of all, she gave me my sense of humor. The ability to laugh at life's tragedies and difficulties has truly been a saving grace.

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 1929, the New York Stock Market crashed signaling the beginning of the greatest economic depression ever experienced by this country. So devastating was this event to the United States that soon the entire world was feeling the pain of the market gone awry. This event was particularly overwhelming for the construction industry, primarily because there was no longer money available for the construction or purchase of homes. Thousands of people lost their life's savings when widespread panic caused runs on the banks and savings and loan associations. Many faced foreclosure on their mortgages and repossession of their homes. The flooding of the housing market with homes available for immediate occupancy further reduced the need for new construction.

During the late 1930's the country began to recover from the ravages of the Great Depression. Building began in earnest, only to be stymied by the entrance of the United States into the Second World War. As the country geared up for war production, all resources and energy were directed toward the war effort, and new construction slowed to a crawl. What new construction there was mainly consisted of temporary housing for government workers or employees of war industries that had migrated to the cities and employment centers from rural areas. The shortage of housing began to become evident as more and more workers clamored for any available place to live. Finally, the war came to a close, and the veterans began returning home.

Returning veterans were eager to resume the lives they put on hold for the duration of the war. Many married sweethearts before departing for the war and many more married upon their return. In both cases, fledgling families found themselves living with friends or relatives, or if they were able to find their own accommodations, living spaces were often times woefully inadequate. Unwilling to be satisfied with the status quo, elected officials enacted numerous pieces of legislation to spur the construction industry and provide much needed housing so that the "American Dream" of a house in the suburbs was within reach of most Americans. What resulted was an almost twenty-year period of phenomenal housing growth.

The post-war house was the industry's answer to the housing shortage. The house types and styles included Cape Cod, Split Level, Ranch, Prefabricated, Modern, Colonial Revival, and even the Quonset Hut. This study is focused on the house type known as the Minimal Traditional Cottage, generally constructed from 1945 to late 1955. Roof pitches are low or intermediate rather than steep as in preceding styles. Eaves and rake are close, rather than overhanging as in the Ranch style (Figure 1).

Figure 1. House with low roof and close, small, eaves.

Often there is a large chimney and at least one front facing gable, both echoing Tudor features with the detailing removed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. House with dominant gable and chimney.

These houses were built in great numbers dominating the large tract developments of the period. Although most were relatively small one-story houses, occasional two-story examples are also seen. More commonly, two-story houses of the period have extra detailing and represent late examples of the Colonial Revival or Monterey style.[1]

Generally, Minimal Traditional Cottages are vernacular interpretations and amalgamations of the previously mentioned types. Their primary inspirations were the basic forms of the Cape Cod and the Ranch, although the government housing built during World War II and designed for defense workers, did set a precedent as well. It is interesting to note that the "Ranch House" moniker has evolved to commonly mean any one-story, rectangular-shaped house that is usually longer than it is wide.

[1] Virginia McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses,* (New York: Knopf , 1997), 478.

I am a child of the so-called "baby boom" years that followed World War II and was raised in a Minimal Traditional Cottage located in unincorporated DeKalb County, Georgia (Figure 3). It was typical of the post-war house but had a uniquely southern twist in that it possessed a screened porch on one side. The porch was included under the main roof structure so that it did not project out from the main body of the house. Obviously, I admired and loved that house because of its connection to my family and childhood, but as I grew in years I admired its simplicity and its sturdiness. I have always wondered why things are as they are and undertook this study to answer questions I had about the design and construction of that house.

Figure 3. The author's boyhood home located at 3692 Lavista Road, Decatur, Georgia.

Another reason for this study is the prevalence of this house type. Millions were constructed and are now reaching the age of eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Other house styles and types have been included because of their significance as

individual buildings due generally to their architecture and/or to the scarcity of the resource. Scarcity is not a concern when considering the post-war house. Rather, the question seems to be in defining what post-war houses are significant and in what area.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 give background information on the various influences that impacted the development of the post-war house. Changing social, economic, and political forces exerted great pressure directly and indirectly to manipulate the end product.

Chapter 4 examines the post-war house and illustrates the impacts of the influences discussed in earlier chapters. Inspirations for design, building products, interiors and exteriors, and landscaping are examined. The Levitts as influential builders are briefly discussed.

The last chapter outlines recommendations for preservation of this resource. Included are suggestions for seeking recognition and increasing the awareness of the significance of the post war house.

CHAPTER 1

THE ECONOMY

Transitioning from a wartime economy to a peacetime economy is never a quick or smooth proposition. After World War II, consumers as well as industry had to traverse the bumpy road that led back to a market-based economy. There were changes in lifestyles, changes in attitudes, and most importantly, changes in the expectations of the future.

World War II

Availability of consumer goods during the war years (1941 to 1945) could best be summed up as dismal. The entire country was engaged in production of goods and materials that would support our war effort and ultimately shorten the duration of the conflict. Shortages were common, and rationing became a way of life. During the war, price controls and materials allocations were put in place to guard against profiteers who might be tempted to take advantage of the emergency situation.

Raw materials, such as lumber, were being used to build everything from the P-T boats of John Kennedy fame to mock tanks and trucks used for gunnery practice by the Army Air Corps. Metals used to make electrical wiring were now being used to produce mess kits or casings for small arms ammunition. National scrap drives were conducted to collect gold, silver, and other precious metals needed to produce delicate medical instruments and equipment for various

weapons systems. Many families donated their heirlooms out of patriotic duty or fear that they would be charged with hording. Anything that could be recycled was recycled.

An obvious result of the price controls and materials allocations was the almost complete halting of the construction industry. Most commercial or industrial building was related to war production, and most housing construction was for the almost twenty million workers that migrated from rural areas to work in the factories. Housing starts had dropped from a high of 937,000 units in 1925 to just 93,000 units in 1933. By the end of the war the housing shortage was so acute that it was estimated that 1.1 million units per year would be needed throughout the 1950's.[2]

Although shortages, allocations and rationing were inconvenient and frustrating, American industry devised new and more efficient ways to use and process raw materials, eventually benefiting the entire society. Lumber shortages prompted the development of plywood and more widespread use of trusses for floors and roofs. Battlefield conditions required power tools to be sturdy and portable, thereby necessitating the development of powerful handheld saws. Construction techniques developed for the quick assemblies of barracks, field hospitals, airstrips and command posts were later fine-tuned and adapted to house construction.

Pent Up Demands

Unemployment after the war was a concern for many Americans, and for a brief time, the rate of unemployment did rise. However by 1948 the annual unemployment rate was only 3.8% and averaged less than 5% over the next ten years.[3] Although some of the defense contractors were forced into laying off production workers because they were unable to convert to peacetime

[2] Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: The Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1981), 240.

[3] http://data.bls.gov/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet

production, other manufacturers, such as General Motors, retooled in anticipation of the expected demand for new automobiles. Veterans were enthusiastic about returning to the jobs they had left behind as the women who had filled those jobs during the war resigned to become housewives and mothers, were dismissed, or demoted. Even though the country was experiencing relatively high rates of inflation the conversion of the economy was successful. The result was an economic boom previously unknown.

This boom created a whole new consumer market that many thought could eliminate gross social inequalities. Years of denial led to overwhelming consumer demand for durable goods. Potential customers were ready to spend substantial sums of money on items that were previously considered luxuries or items of excess. Times were good. New car sales jumped from 69,500 in 1945 to 2.1 million in 1946 to over 6.7 million in 1949. Over 12 million families had two cars by 1950. Of the homes that had electricity, 86% had refrigerators, 72% had washing machines, and 57% had vacuum cleaners. Food spending increased by 33 %, and clothing by 20%, but household furnishings and appliances rose by over 240 %. In 1946 7,000 televisions, retailing for over $500, were sold. As prices began to drop, sales increased in 1948 to 975,000 and 4.4 million in 1950.[4]

Per capita income in 1945 was up almost 35% over the year preceding the war. Average income levels had risen significantly, doubling discretionary income with available spending cash rising almost 40% since 1929. The number of salaried workers increased by 61% between 1947 and 1957. Over 60% of the population were now considered middle class with incomes

[4] J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), 8.

between $3,000 and $10,000. Prior to the Depression only 31% of Americans could claim membership in the middle class.[5]

Admission into the middle class brought certain desires and expectations, among them a house in the suburbs. The problem was that there were not enough houses available to meet the demand. Rental housing supplied some of the demand but what soon emerged was the realization that people bought homes because they "needed" to buy. The Depression had created a desire for stable family life and better homes, and the war meant having to postpone those dreams. Buying a home reaffirmed the sense of family and reestablished roots for many who had become transient over the previous generation. Housing had become one of the nation's four great industries, including food, clothing and automobiles. By 1954 housing would become larger than the automobile industry.[6]

[5] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were; American Families and the Nostalgia Trap (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 25.*

[6] Oakley, 10.

CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL INFLUENCES

World War II, like all major wars in the history of the United States, changed our society forever. Technology advanced at a faster rate than at any other time in our past, propelling us into the forefront as the world's first super power. We became the mightiest military power and the economic engine that drove the rest of the world. Affluence and the ability to acquire the trappings of wealth was the core of a new order.

The "American Dream"

For most people, the "American Dream" was associated with personal and professional success as measured by your automobile and the size and location of your home. Even today, a house in the suburbs with a two-car garage and two children indicates some degree of achievement. Historian James Truslow Adams first put the term "American Dream" into print in the 1930's, perhaps as a response to the loss America experienced during the Depression.[7] The notion of such a dream goes as far back as the founding of our country, when the small-town, agrarian-based society derived its power and worth from the land. The ability of the average man to own land created status and formed a link to the powerful. The post-war period was the beginning of the realization of that dream for the majority of Americans.

Suburban living and home ownership had long been a part of the "American Dream" and the upward climb to middle-class social status. Suburbs began to achieve prominence during the

[7] http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuban/pal/append/axs.html.

Nineteenth century as city dwellers attempted to escape the ills of city life. Various reform movements heightened public awareness of crowded conditions, poor sanitation, violent crime, and congested streets. Most working and middle class families could not afford home ownership and were forced into living in tenements or small houses located near manufacturing and commercial centers. As soon as possible, they moved into row houses and then single-family houses that were located in the city. With each successive move, they attempted to distance themselves and their families from the city center. Those who attained upper middle class status and were able to afford to move away from the city found refuge in the suburbs. The suburbs provided people their own homes located on their own parcels of land with a rural or small-town character reminiscent of our agrarian past.

Unlike earlier suburbs, the post-war suburb was located much farther away from the city, where land was inexpensive. More remote locations generally made development easier and less costly due to a lack of restrictive regulations or zoning ordinances. Notable, though, is the marked difference in the manner in which the suburbs were designed and constructed. The late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century suburban boom occurred during the "City Beautiful" era that emphasized beautification and harmony with nature (Figure 4). Much time and effort was expended selecting a lot and the appropriate site for the house on the lot. Neighborhoods such as Atlanta's Grant Park and Inman Park, and, later, Druid Hills and Virginia-Highlands, were developed around the terrain and natural beauty of the area and platted with larger lots. Developers of the post-war era were not as likely to consider nature as grading and earth moving equipment capable of creating topographic features was used to level the building sites and, in doing so, maximize lot yield. Although the lots were smaller and more crowded than in earlier suburbs, more Americans owned real estate in the suburbs. In the decade of the 1950's, 83.5%

of the population growth occurred in the suburbs.[8] It seemed the "Dream" was becoming attainable to the average American.

Figure 4. Post card of lake in Grant Park, Atlanta.[9]

The Middle Class of the Post-War Suburb

Home ownership was the common thread linking the middle class of the early suburbs with the post-war middle class. A home was the entrée into the middle class. The members were not particularly sophisticated, preferring beer to wine. This new rising middle class was anxious about status and consisted of a broad range of blue-collar workers and white-collar managers and professionals. A study of the residents of Levittown, New Jersey indicated 74% of the population was employed in white collar or professional jobs.[10] Military service and the GI Bill made a college education available for 40% of the nation's men between the age of 20 and 24. At the end of 1945 almost 400,000 veterans were enrolled in colleges. That number more than tripled in 1946, with over 1.5 million veterans enrolled. By the fall of 1955 approximately

[8] Oakley, 111.
[9] http://grantpark.dreamtv.net/page.asp?itemid=11808&siteid=20
[10] Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1967) 22.

7,800,000 veterans had embarked on an education or received training under the GI Bill.[11] The strength and composition of the middle class was greatly improved by this generation of well-educated professional businessmen and homeowners.

Although better educated, they were not quite as wealthy as their predecessors in pre-war suburbs. However, they had greater purchasing power as a group and were willing to exercise their influence on the markets. The post-war development of a consumer-based economy gave them purchasing power and directed the manufacture of all sorts of goods. Leisure time and leisure activities were dominant parts of suburban life. Americans were spending over $30 billion per year on leisure goods and services. From 1950 to 1960 the amount spent on spectator sports admissions rose from $222 million to $290 million.[12] Ownership and use of private automobiles shortened commuting times. Lawns were mowed with a power mower. Laundry was washed in automatic washers and dried in electric clothes dryers. Noted food critic Duncan Hines founded a company to market instant cake mixes. Frozen TV dinners were introduced to eat while you relaxed, watching the new phenomenon, television. Casual clothing made of easy care fabrics dominated fashions. Low-maintenance building materials such as linoleum, and washable paints, were preferred and demanded. Time was now available for many different types of activities outside of the home.

Many suburbanites developed a civic consciousness for the first times in their lives. The nature of suburban life served as a catalyst for membership in political parties, homeowners associations, PTAs, civic groups, and volunteer associations. Baseball, softball, and tennis teams were formed. It seems, in some instances, that any excuse to assemble together as a group was a

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[11] http://www.gibill.va.gov/education/GI_Bill.htm.

[12] Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United State: Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D. C., 1975) 401.

basis for the beginning of a club or organization.[13] There was a strong need to belong, but also to have a voice in what was happening in their communities and how it affected them, their families, and their property values. Middle class suburbanites of the post-war period were developing and inculcating conservative values and a conformist philosophy.[14]

For the most part, suburbs were following the national trend away from the political ideology that brought us so many social programs. Conservative politicians regarded home ownership not only as a means to improve the country but also as a means to expand their ideology. Harry Truman's "Fair Deal" was less radical than the "New Deal," but the country was yearning for a "return to normalcy" and elected Republican Dwight Eisenhower to the Presidency in 1952.[15] Conservative thinking was due in part to the emphasis on traditional values.

The notions of family and marriage were romanticized and encouraged in books, magazines and popular culture. Marketers of new products embraced the family by creating family sized portions, family restaurants, family cars, family movies, family vacations, and even the family room. Family and children became such a part of suburban living that suburbs were often referred to as "rabbit hutches" or "Fertile Acres." There was a revival of the Nineteenth century theme of domesticity and the sanctity of the home. Religion enjoyed a resurgence as church attendance increased.[16] The saying, "The family that prays together, stays together" was popularized in the early 1950's. Fear of the Russians and a nuclear war further enhanced the belief that a return to traditional values and the celebration of America would protect us from outside enemies.

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[13] Oakley, 116.
[14] Ibid., 314.
[15] Ibid. , 37.
[16] Ibid., 319.

Conformity in the suburbs was thought to have positive effects on families, neighborhoods and, ultimately, the nation. People wanted similar houses, similar types of cars, and the same number of children.[17] Since the majority of the residents in the new neighborhoods were former military personnel, conformity seemed to be an extension of the stability and order that was part of their service life. A group mentality developed that, to most, appeared acceptable and normal. While individual achievement in business or civic pursuits was admirable and encouraged, it was expected for achievement not to lead to excess or eccentricity. Home improvements, clothing, automobiles, choice of magazines and countless other living decisions had to follow certain conventions to be acceptable. The status anxious did not want to stand out for the wrong reasons. To be an individualist was considered subversive, or so the Senator McCarthys of the world wanted us to believe. If you were not a part of the group, then you must have been against the group. Talk of conspiracy abounded.

Noted sociologists of the period openly expressed concern and criticized the homogenous demographics of the typical suburb and the pressures to conform. Typical families were white, with 2.17 children. The average adults were 31 years of age. Few single, widowed or divorced people lived in the suburbs since being single signaled some kind of fault and possible deviance. Psychologist Sidonie Gruenberg warned, "…standardized housing breeds standardized individualists." Many thought modern suburban life to be sad, lonely, and isolated, as illustrated in popular books such as The Organization Man and The Lonely Crowd. Woeful executives left the rigid corporate world at the end of the day only to retreat to a suburban community that may have been even more rigid.[18]

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[17] Oakley, 315.
[18] Wright, 256.

Today we view segregation and racism as unacceptable and abhorrent. However, during the post-war era, the federal government institutionalized policies promoting both. Instructional pamphlets and guides published by the Federal Housing Administration warned developers about the "Negro Invasion." A 1947 manual advocated the use of protective covenants as a means to regulate the development and create harmonious attractive neighborhoods[19]. A 1957 Life Magazine article reported that "10,000 Negroes work at the Ford Plant in Dearborn, but not one Negro can live in Dearborn itself."[20]

Although the Supreme Court outlawed restrictive covenants in 1948, the FHA continued to issue mortgages in restrictive neighborhoods and turned a blind eye to redlining by private lending institutions until the practice was finally ended in 1968. Even so, many developers including William Levitt, would not sell to African-Americans. Instead, they steered prospective buyers to developments already integrated or to established ethnic neighborhoods. In many cases this meant substandard housing at premium prices. Upward mobility through equal opportunity obviously did not include non-whites. Prior to the war most African-Americans lived in the rural South, but in the years following the war, over 80% lived in the cities and in the North.[21] It is interesting to note that not until 1950 did the typical African-American live in a census tract with a black majority.[22]

The American Family

Nationwide emphasis on marriage, family and children was centered on the new suburb. Television brought the ideal to life in the Cleavers, Nelsons and Andersons as the archetypes of

[19] Ibid., 247
[20] Coontz, 31.
[21] Ibid., 31.
[22] Ibid.,, 243.

the American family. The average American was anxious to see his family in that happy suburban home. Prosperous times made it easier to take on the economic responsibilities of family and a home. The GI Bill had ensured that veterans would be well educated and thus well paid. Increasing affordability and availability of housing were also factors in prompting many to make the commitment at an earlier age. Median age for married couples in 1900 was 25.9 for men and 21.9 for women. By the mid-1950s the median age had dropped to 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women. In 1953 one-third of the women who married were 19. Couples appeared to be happy with each other, as evidenced by the divorce rates, which peaked at one in every ten marriages in 1947, and remained there until the 1960s.[23] Of course, happy marriages meant more children.

The ideal family was portrayed as Ozzie and Harriett with two children. The procreation ethic encouraged parents to have multiple children and in reality, even though birth control was available, failure to use it often meant that the average family had three or four children. America was truly a child-centered society as the birth rate for having a third child doubled between 1940 and 1960. Birthrates rose from 19 per 1,000 in 1930 to 27 per 1,000 in 1950. There were 3.6 million births between 1946 and 1950. The post-war birth rate peaked in 1957, when 4.3 million babies were born.[24] Pregnancy, once publicly unmentionable, was celebrated as a special time in a woman's life. Television audiences followed Lucy's pregnancy and Life, in its Christmas 1956 issue, chronicled a pregnancy, including photographs of the delivery of the baby.[25]

As the children grew into their teens, the suburbs proved to be a good place to shield youth from the growing violence and crime of the cities and the outside world. The innocence of

[23] Oakley, 117.
[24] Ibid., 119.
[25] Ibid., 120.

the suburbs had always been a primary attraction for many parents. Children were able to play in the streets and on community playgrounds without much warning about strangers. Most young mothers could find help in raising their children from the more experienced mothers in the neighborhood. Generally, they were willing to help each other by passing on clothing, babysitting, car-pooling and the like.

Pressure on women to be domestic was overwhelming, as most women in the suburbs did not work outside of the house. Nationwide, 27% of women held jobs, while only 9% in the suburbs did so.[26] Women derived their being from their homes and were expected to spend more time with their families and husbands. They were expected to remain physically attractive, act passively, and have dinner ready when the man of the house returned from a hard day's work. They were expected to be teachers, chauffeurs, and constant companions to their children. Time said, "If the theory of evolution is still working it may well one day transform the suburban housewife's right foot into a flared paddle, grooved for easy traction on the gas pedal and brake."[27] A hard-working, efficient wife added stability to the family and often times saved it from disaster, at least the variety found weekly on the "Ozzie and Harriett Show". Magazines of the day glorified the housewife as the center of all daytime activity and the key figure in suburbia.

Men were naturally expected to follow in the Biblical tradition of provider and ruler of the house. However, the child-centered, post-war years and the emphasis on social climbing and conformity were manifested in changing gender roles for men and eventually for women. Men were still the primary breadwinners, but they were expected to be involved with their children and with household duties. Time with the family usually centered on recreational activities but

[26] Wright, 256.
[27] Oakley, 111.

included home improvement projects. To some degree, the modern suburb domesticated men as much as women. Older, established neighborhoods in the city usually had gathering places where men congregated for male camaraderie. When post-war developments were new, local pubs or fraternal organizations did not exist and men simply spent more time at home with their families and their neighbors.

The home and family were considered the wellsprings of happiness and self esteem. The term "togetherness" was coined in response to the great amount of time husbands and wives and families spent together. Parents spent more time getting to know each other and to know their children. Since the post-war house was meant to be a starter home, many residents remodeled, making additions and alterations as housing needs changed. Some home purchasers borrowed additional money and earmarked it for improvement before they even moved into the house. Even though purchasers liked their homes, most thought there was room for improvement. Improvements were seen as a means to enhance the value of the property and relationships among the members of the family. Sometimes relationships were strengthened simply because there was more room available. Other times it was because all members of the family were given a sense of worth and achievement because they were part of the project.

The American family has never been static. Constant in the history of the American family is change. The post-war period accelerated the changes within the family because of technological advances, economic successes, and a collective idea of what ought to be.

CHAPTER 3

GOVERNMENTAL INFLUENCE

It could successfully be argued that the most significant influences on the post-war house emanated from the Federal Government. Federal legislation, as well as the policies of federal agencies, manipulated everything from the location of post-war developments to the minimum square footage of individual homes. In some instances, the influence was intentional. In other cases, the influence was coincidental to a non-housing related issue, as was true in most things related to the period's politics. In either situation, the government played a key role in promoting the construction of residential homes following World War II.

The greatest impacts were due primarily to federal road legislation and federal housing legislation and policy. Roads provided the conduits for the new suburbanites to reach their homes and housing legislation provided a means for the average American to purchase a new home.

Federal Roads Legislation

Many roads in the United States, particularly in the South, remained unpaved in 1950. Travel outside of urbanized areas demanded that motorists carried tools, emergency fuel and rations, and towels to remove the dust, mud, and dirt from their faces. Early in our history, roads were thought to be the responsibility of state and local governments. However, the inability of local jurisdictions to provide good roads led states to adopt programs to appropriate funds to be

made available to counties for local road improvements. The Federal Government provided advice on the best methods of improving local roads.

In 1902 Congress was asked to create a Bureau of Public Roads to oversee $20 million in federal aid to states. The bill did not pass but laid the groundwork for future considerations and began the dialogue on federal road aid. Not until farmers began taking an active role in the debate did Congress take notice. Farmers were initially reluctant to support road legislation because they viewed it simply as a way to be taxed so that city dwellers could have a smooth surface to ride their bikes. The introduction of the Rural Free Delivery changed all of that, as mail delivery depended on good roads.[28]

In addition, the introduction of the Model T put hundreds of thousands of automobiles on an insufficient and sub-standard road system, garnering the interest of the average citizen. The Supreme Court aided the roads lobby by determining in 1907 that Congress had the power to construct interstate highways.[29] Finally, the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916 was passed, establishing the Bureau of Public Roads.

In the Bureau's first year, only $5 million was available, but by 1922 over $189 million had been spent building almost 10,000 miles of federal highways.[30] The improvements generally took the form of grading and application of sand, clay, and gravel. During the Depression most road funds were diverted from projects that served transportation needs to those that could provide work for the unemployed through the Public Works Administration. By the late 1930s the federal-aid highway system was completed. Although many rural segments were unpaved, virtually all had received some initial form of treatment and improvement.

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[28] http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw96a.htm.
[29] Ibid.
[30] http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw96c.htm.

Pressure to support the construction of a transcontinental superhighway began to appear in the late 1930s. President Roosevelt expressed interest in a six-route toll way that would traverse the country with three east-west routes and three north-south routes. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1938 directed the Bureau of Public Roads to conduct a study on the feasibility of such a network. The study found that some of the roads could be supported by tolls, but the current amount of traffic was insufficient to support most of the roads. However, the study recommended that a free interregional highway network, consisting of almost 26,000 miles of roads with limited access and multiple lanes be constructed.[31] Although the recommendation was well-received, no action was taken until 1943, when a revised report of the study was published.

The published report went into minute detail of the interregional system and included designs based on a 20-year traffic projection. Urban freeways and the network of roads connecting them to the system were highlighted as an important force in the development of cities and the surrounding areas. By this time, concern was mounting over the fate of returning veterans once the war was over, and some thought was given to the use of highway projects as a means of attaining full employment. Very little else was accomplished until 1944.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 appeared to be drowning in the disagreements between urban and rural interest over funding formulas and ratios. Very little discussion was oriented towards consideration of the post-war transportation needs of the country as the act primarily maintained the status quo with one very important exception. It authorized a 39,000-mile interstate highway system connecting major metropolitan areas and industrial centers.[32] This was the pre-cursor to the modern day interstate system.

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[31] http://www.tfhrc.gov/pubrds/summer96/p96su10.htm.
[32] Ibid.

The project moved slowly until the election of Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. In Germany, President Eisenhower saw firsthand the importance of a good highway system to national defense. He saw the advantages enjoyed by the Germans because of the autobahn network and noted the enhanced mobility of the Allies when they reached Germany. Still embroiled in the Korean conflict, the president made the plea for highways, equating good roads with a national defense against nuclear attack. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952 had authorized the first funds specifically for interstate highway construction; however, it was not until the Federal Highway Act of 1956 that the Federal Government provided sufficient funding to realize the completion of the highways.

Suburban development is based largely on prices, products, and proximity to transportation corridors leading to employment centers. A further consideration is the average amount of time it takes to reach those destinations. In the 1950's the average commute was between 30 and 90 minutes. Miles traveled jumped from 458 billion annually in 1950 to nearly 800 billion in 1960.[33] Had it not been for the massive road building projects to reduce those times and make travel easier, few buyers would have come forth, regardless of the price or quality of the homes.

Federal Housing Legislation

After World War I residential construction was a leading factor in the boom of the 1920's, with three fourths of the housing market targeted to the upper one-third of income earners and none to the bottom third. Proceeds from the stock market had elevated many Americans to middle class status and the ability to afford a home in the suburbs. Construction

[33]Douglas T. Miller, *The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1977) 139.

peaked in 1925 with 937,000 units completed, doubling the number of houses built in 1921. By 1929, production had dropped 46% to 509,000.[34]

By 1932 over 250,000 homes had been foreclosed, but the emphasis was still on the collapsing stock market and ever-increasing numbers of bank failures and growing unemployment. Throughout 1930 and 1931 President Hoover refused to intervene with the financial resources of the federal government, convinced that prosperity was just around the corner. Federal intervention in private business or housing was considered socialism and a threat to free enterprise; however, since 1933 there has scarcely been a session of Congress without debate on the housing program. While not as pressing as the banks and the markets, the housing problem had become sufficiently acute, so President Hoover convened the President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership.[35]

While the conference produced a series of reports that would prove valuable in future years, little was done to alleviate the housing shortages for the lower income people. The conference recognized the need for subsidies but stopped short of recommending that the housing become an area of Federal responsibility or concern. The primary recommendation that did provide for some sort of relief was to provide capital for the establishment of 12 regional Federal Home Loan Banks to advance credit to savings and loan associations to secure first mortgages. Unfortunately, by the time it was enacted in July of 1932, the Depression had deepened to the point where the intended rescue could not occur at that time.

To his credit, Hoover did sign the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932 that earmarked $3.5 billion for construction of low-income housing and slum clearance and reconstruction. A single loan was granted for $8 million to renovate Knickerbocker Village in

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[34] Nathaniel S. Keith, *Politics and the Housing Crisis Since 1930* (New York: Universe Books, 1973) 17.
[35] Ibid., 19.

New York City. Unfortunately for Hoover, it was too little, too late. His refusal to involve the power and influence of the Federal Government to stem the collapse of the country cost the country billions and cost Hoover an election. By Inauguration Day, 1933, the unemployment rate had climbed to 33% idling over 17 million workers. National income was less than half of the amount in pre-Depression America. Home building was creeping along, having reduced production by almost 84%, and people were hording gold and currency and making runs on the few solvent banks and savings and loan associations remaining open. General Hugh S. Johnson, who would later lead the National Industrial Recovery Program for President Roosevelt, was quoted later as remarking that no one would ever know "how close we were to collapse and revolution. We could have got a dictator a lot easier than Germany got Hitler."[36]

Despite those grim days, the country persevered and ushered in a new president touting a "New Deal." The national economy was largely at its knees because labor was unable to produce and consumers unable to purchase. There was also a persistent credit crisis as farm and home foreclosures reached almost 1,000 per day in 1933.[37] Against this backdrop, the first steps were taken toward the establishment of a national housing policy. Within the Senate, there emerged great pressures to develop a public works program to provide employment, revitalize the construction industry, and stimulate recovery. The Senate developments provided an opening for housing professionals to include public housing to produce construction jobs and, for the first time to provide good housing for low-income families through federal funds.

The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 was enacted, authorizing the use of $3.3 billion to finance the construction of low-cost housing and slum clearance. An ambitious

[36] Ibid., 22.
[37] Ibid., 13.

program, there were ultimately 21,000 units in 57 cities developed under the authorization of the act.[38] This plan was the forerunner of today's low-rent public housing programs.

Simultaneously the Roosevelt administration and Congress enacted the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in early 1933. HOLC was financed by federal capital and bonds and authorized to purchase defaulted mortgages from savings and loan associations that could not carry them any longer. HOLC then refinanced the loans including delinquent taxes, and deferred repairs for the occupant. The loans were underwritten at a moderate interest rate and financed over a long period of years. During its first three years, HOLC financed the equivalent of one out of five of all mortgages on owner-occupied homes in the non-farm areas of the nation. The typical borrower was delinquent two years on his old mortgage and was in arrears almost three years on real estate taxes. The total number of loans granted exceeded one million and was valued at $3.1 billion.[39]

It can be argued that by freeing money that had been frozen in defaulted mortgages, allowing lending institutions to make new loans, HOLC prevented the total collapse of the home-financing industry. HOLC's revolutionary and innovative repayment plans greatly influenced modern mortgage lending practices. Mortgages could now be financed for 20 years as one loan. Traditional mortgage loans had generally been restricted to no more than 50% of the value of a property, and the life of the loan rarely exceeded five years. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. later commented, "… by enabling thousands of Americans to save their homes, it strengthened their stake both in the existing order and in the New Deal. Probably no single measure consolidated so much middle class support for the administration."[40]

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[38] Ibid., 23.
[39] Ibid., 24.
[40] Ibid., 24.

The rescue activities of HOLC were confined to troubled savings and loan associations even though other institutions, such as banks and life insurance companies, held a great volume of delinquent mortgages. As the success of HOLC continued, material suppliers and homebuilders began to clamor for the extension of federal assistance to the banks and others. The supporters believed this was a way to invigorate the still largely inactive construction industry. In response, the National Housing Act of 1934, creating the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), was adopted.

The basic principle of the FHA was to stimulate recovery in private mortgage lending and home building by a system of mortgage insurance protecting the lender against loss in the event of default by the homebuyer. In the event of a default the FHA would acquire the mortgage in return for its debentures covering the entire unpaid balance. These debentures had a full guarantee from the Federal Treasury as to the principle and interest.

The cost of the program was met by a small mortgage insurance premium paid by the homebuyer as part of his monthly mortgage payment. In return for this protection, the lender agreed to make a long-term loan, initially 20 years, covering 80% of the home cost at an interest rate within a ceiling set by the FHA. The FHA contributed further to the HOLC-initiated reforms by improving the standards of construction, especially for lower-priced homes, and raising the quality of subdivision site planning in suburbs. Also included were provisions to provide short-term loans at a better than average rate for home improvements. Within one year of the adoption of the Act, 4,000 of the banking institutions in the country had issued 73,000 home improvement loans.[41] The Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation was established to protect savings and loan institutions on a basis generally comparable to Federal bank deposit insurance.

[41] Wright, 241.

These programs constituted the nucleus of the New Deal housing programs. The establishment of these programs was justified to relieve an emergency situation caused by the devastation of the Depression. Their significance lies in the fact that there was widespread recognition that solutions to national housing problems required intervention by the Federal Government. Within the span of two short years, there had been a complete reversal of the long-established principle that housing was the responsibility of private enterprise and in no way should be considered a responsibility of the federal government.[42]

The initial support by both parties of New Deal legislation and programs was relatively short lived, and by the elections of 1934, Republicans were confident the voters would see the New Deal was a passing phenomenon. However, the Democrats further increased their majority in both the House and Senate as an old argument raised its ugly head. The polarizing issue was public housing. Renewed cries that government involvement was a threat to private enterprise and a socialization of residential real estate were resounding from the National Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the National Association of Retail Lumber Dealers, and the United States Savings and Loan League. While cloaked in ideological opposition, it appears the underlying reason that they were not in favor of the programs was financial. In short, the members of the associations would be in direct competition with the Federal Government for the low-income housing dollar. It is interesting to note that these organizations were silent when it came to government intervention on behalf of private enterprise. They wanted government support that would take the risk out of investments in conventional residential construction.[43]

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[42] Keith, 26.
[43] Ibid., 38.

Debate continued over government involvement in public housing, but the United States Housing Act (USHA) of 1937, creating the Public Housing Administration, passed by an overwhelming majority. Heralded as the high water mark in New Deal liberalism in housing, the Act provided subsidies to local housing authorities to provide housing for the poor at rents aligned with their ability to pay. During 1939 over 50,000 public housing units were put into production.[44]

Overall, the New Deal housing programs contributed to a steady recovery in the total volume of housing production. By 1939, starts of dwellings had recovered to about the 1929 level, and the FHA program was playing an increasing role in the development of privately financed housing during this period. By 1940 about 40% of all private housing starts were under the umbrella of the FHA mortgage insurance system. Unfortunately, the specter of war was looming in the background.

The transition to a wartime economy began in earnest in 1940, sounding the death knell for further reforms or social and economic advances from the New Deal. Inevitably, housing felt the impact of the transition as the USHA was amended to authorize the use of its loan provisions for the housing of defense workers during a defense emergency. Ultimately 30% of the housing units financed under the USHA were for the defense workers who migrated to the cities during World War II. Many of these buildings were later used to satisfy the need for low-income housing. Also notable in 1940 was the first Census of Housing. The census indicated that 17 million dwelling units, or 49% of the existing housing stock, were structurally substandard or lacked a private bath.[45] Attempts to correct these conditions had to be postponed at least for the duration of the war.

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[44] Ibid., 39.
[45] Ibid., 39.

The harsh realities of war quickly forced a drastic readjustment in the housing and construction industry. The massive quantities of materials and manpower needed for the war effort promptly depleted the existing supply except for basic necessities. A rigorous system of materials priorities and allocations was established and enforced by the War Production Board. All critical materials, including those for house construction, were directed to distribution points for war production. At the same time, men in the 18 to 37 year old age bracket were joining the armed services by the thousands, significantly reducing the number of available construction workers needed to fulfill the demand for defense housing.

By late 1944 it was becoming evident that the tides of war were turning, and the Allies would be victorious. Administration officials were beginning to have time to consider domestic issues, including housing. The existing shortage and condition of housing was serious and it was evident the situation would soon be critical, as veterans began returning home. John Blandford, head of the National Housing Administration, outlined the Federal Government's policy on housing by pronouncing the following:

> All American families should get decent housing. This includes millions of veterans who will need homes. It includes families in rural shacks and urban slums. It includes all minority groups. We can have the manpower, resources, industry and brains to do the whole job.
>
> The slums must go. Their economic and social cost is intolerably high. They must be replaced gradually through a rounded program, which includes decent housing within the means of slum dwellers.
>
> Housing should conserve when it can. Investments in present housing have value. Fundamentally sound housing that has commenced to run down should be rehabilitated and repaired before it is too late. Neighborhoods should be maintained, rather than discarded or allowed to decay.
>
> The Federal Government's role in housing should be supplementary. It should do what cannot be done otherwise. It should help private enterprise to sere the largest possible portion of the nation's housing needs. Public agencies must be ready to withdraw from any area when better incomes or lower costs enable

> individuals, cooperatives, labor groups, or business organizations to pick up the responsibility and carry it forward. But the Government's role, while supplementary, involves bedrock responsibility for making sure that decent housing for all the people is gradually achieved.[46]

In this landmark declaration of March 9, 1944, Blandford set the course for meeting the special housing needs of returning veterans, identified the cost of slums in social terms, set the stage for historic preservation, and, most importantly, established government's responsibility to ensure decent housing for all.

Four months later, on June 22, 1944, President Roosevelt signed into law the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill of Rights. The bill was both a way to reward veterans for their service and to cushion the economic blow as they returned and searched for peacetime jobs. Veterans were to receive up to 52 weeks of unemployment compensation at the rate of $20 per week. In addition, there were two monumental provisions of the bill, educational assistance and mortgage loan guarantees, which resulted in enormous impacts on American society. Educational assistance, initially up to $500 per year for tuition, books, and fees and $75 per month subsistence allowance, paved the way for the most educated generation of American men to enter the business world. At its inception, the maximum amount of mortgage loan guaranty was limited to 50% of the loan, but not to exceed $2,000, for a period of up to 20 years at a maximum interest rate of 4%. Subsequent bills allowed veterans to finance 100% of the mortgage without any money as a down payment and adjusted the maximum loan amount as needed. The bill was one factor helping to place home ownership within reach for the 15 million veterans who served during World War II and

[46] Ibid., 49.

transformed the majority of Americans from renters to homeowners. In the 1940s, 43.6% of Americans owned their own homes and by 1950 that number had risen to 55%.[47]

Passage of the GI Bill required a relatively short period of time. During the six months prior to its adoption, many in Congress and post secondary education expressed concerns and trepidation about the proposed programs. Early arguments centered on the obvious expense and the belief that the unemployment benefits would act as a disincentive for veterans to return to work. Educators were immediately overwhelmed at the thought of campuses being flooded with new students and worried if their universities were up to the logistical nightmares that the flood might bring. Quietly, they were concerned about the quality of the prospective students and their academic impact on the institutions.

The American Legion is credited with designing the major portions of the bill and with spearheading the drive for adoption. The Legion learned valuable lessons from the return of veterans after the First World War and from the infamous veterans Bonus March on Washington in 1932. Working with the Administration for the benefit of veterans proved to be more rewarding and more productive than taking an adversarial approach. Members of the Legion knew they had a Herculean task before them, as Congress had earlier failed to act on approximately 640 bills concerning veterans. Keeping this in mind, John Stelle, former Governor of Illinois and the Legion's Commander, drew up the first draft of the bill and led the campaign for its passage. Thanks to the tie-breaking vote from Rep. John Gibson of Georgia, the bill made it out of committee and on to be approved.[48]

Eventually, 5.3 million World War II veterans received readjustment allowances, and 3.8 million participated in the home loan guaranty program. The total cost of the education program

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[47] http://www.census.gov/hhes/housing/census/historic/owner/html.
[48] http//www.gibill.va.gov/education/GI_Bill.htm.

was $14.5 billion, as over half of the 15 million veterans eligible for benefits attended college or other formalized training.[49] Although costly, the millions who continued their education provided for a smoother transition from war to peace by leaving the job market and reducing the amount of joblessness during the demobilization period.

In February of 1946, President Truman issued an executive order initiating the Veteran's Emergency Housing Program amid much fanfare and controversy. The program was primarily aimed at applying wartime production techniques and controls to the solution of the veterans' housing shortage. The basic concepts of the program were to continue price controls on building materials and to establish allocation priorities for residential builders with a preference for rental and sale of finished projects to veterans. All non-essential construction would be halted, renewed emphasis was to be placed on the manufacture of pre-fabricated houses, and a goal of 750,000 completed units was established for 1947. A production target of 1.2 million site-built units was instituted for 1946. In addition, there would be price and rental ceilings established for all new housing, investment incentives for private investors and profit guarantees for companies willing to risk capital on manufactured housing.[50]

Despite the controversy raised over price controls, the program did have substantial success. Housing starts were up from 345,000 in 1945 to 1,023,000 in 1946, narrowly missing the established production target.[51] The majority of the homes were built for the middle-income and lower-middle-income veterans, excluding the low-income veterans. Regardless, the program did appear to have an impact on the housing shortage.

The lines of support and opposition were drawn during the initial debates, as both sides continued to argue their points after adoption. Charges of profiteering and corruption were

[49] Ibid.
[50] Keith, 60.
[51] Ibid., 64.

leveled at the various supporters, and much discussion about the need to remove price controls stirred the public. The election of 1946 placed both houses of Congress under the control of Republicans who had run on platforms against continuation of wartime restraints. President Truman, in response to what he perceived as the will of the people, issued an executive order terminating the program on January 11, 1947.

Controversy and debate continued over the role of the federal government in public housing. To some it was considered socialism in its most insidious form. To others it was the country's duty and responsibility to assist where it could. The National Housing Act of 1949 articulated as a goal of American housing policy, "a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family."[52] Initially, the act did not extend protection to minorities or the lower-income families. It is clear that the intent of the act was to discourage and end segregation in residential neighborhoods; however, the only intent was moral. It was not until the provisions of the act were incorporated into the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 did the intent become legislated.

The act also required significant design and construction improvements to the typical house and encouraged well-planned development. It also allowed greater profitability for large residential developments, including apartments. Most of the housing shortage was perceived to have been in the suburbs; however, minorities and low-income renters were facing housing shortages in the cities. Section 608 of the act was designed to entice builders to construct apartment complexes in urban areas to help alleviate this part of the shortage. Undoubtedly, the greatest legacy of the act was the invocation of decent housing and home ownership as a national goal.

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[52] Richard O. Davies, *Housing Reform* During *the Truman Administration* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966) 114.

Post-War Politics

When the fighting stopped, the armed forces began to demobilize, the economy began to transition to peacetime, and life generally got back to normal. As the imminent dangers of Japan and Germany were neutralized, the emphasis in the Truman administration shifted from national defense to the regular business of the people. Unfortunately for President Truman, after 14 years of New Deal policies and reforms, the nation was in a conservative mood and wanted prosperity and stability rather than more social and economic reform. Congress was controlled by Republicans who had vowed to vote against any measure they regarded as an extension of New Deal programs, and big business and powerful pressure groups lobbied against further reforms. It was a time best remembered for its partisanship and bitter struggles between the White House and Congress. Truman used the veto 250 times and was overridden 12 times, the most overrides of any President since Andrew Johnson. The Truman years were relatively unproductive when it came to reform of domestic policy. Interestingly, Truman knew the least about foreign policy, yet, he is remembered most for achievements in that arena.[53]

The United States had become a global power actively involved in the United Nations, reconstructing war torn Europe, protecting the borders of friendly countries thousands of miles away, and containing communism. Dominating political thought and discussion was communism. Approximately 70% of Americans believed the Soviet Union was an insatiably ambitious nation bent on world domination and 19% thought the world would end if we went to war with Russia.[54] When Russia tested its first atomic device in 1949, we entered into the age of the atomic nightmare where millions could be killed instantly. Later, in 1952, when the

[53] Oakley, 37.
[54] Ibid., 48.

Russians exploded their first hydrogen bomb just six months after the United States, the cities were now vaporized. Concerns about atomic war, communist spies under every bed, and an imminent Russian invasion grew until they had acquired an importance reserved for religious beliefs and were eventually termed the "Great Fear."

Earlier communist fears had swept the country and led to the formation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 to investigate alleged subversives. Conspiracy theories abounded, particularly since many thought the Roosevelt reforms were communist or socialist in nature. Some even thought that Roosevelt and Truman had unwittingly followed the Communists and allowed them to lead the nation towards communism. Moreover, there was a common misconception that Russians were too backward to have developed the bomb on their own and must have had help from spies deep within our own Department of Defense.

It is reasonable to assume that there were spies operating in the United States just as there are today. However, the fear and suspicion morphed into hysteria when Senator Joe McCarthy claimed, on the floor of the Senate, that Russian operatives had infiltrated the State Department. McCarthy, as vice chair of the Joint Housing Committee had led the way for the Lustron Company to receive $22 million worth of government loans to maximize production of metal pre-fabricated houses. In return, Lustron paid McCarthy $10,000 to write a never-published or finished magazine article.[55]

So began a period of investigations, blacklists, and congressional hearings resulting in jail time, ruined careers, and fear and suspicion of anyone different. McCarthy led the charge but had a lot of help from others, (including Richard Nixon) who were seeking a way to gain fame and political recognition. Finally Senator McCarthy imploded his campaign when he attempted

[55] Wright, 244.

to cast aspersions on the military and its leadership. McCarthy was censured and died three years later.

The election of Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952 returned the control of the country solidly to the hands of the conservatives. The country felt safer with an experienced and respected military leader as president. He was viewed as an intelligent, confident, and hard working president with a keen perception of the politics, politicians, issues, and problems of the day. The motto on his desk, "Gentle in manner, strong in deed," was indicative of his leadership style.[56] Eisenhower brought the war in Korea to an end without global nuclear war, but at the same time escalated the Cold War by amassing nuclear weapons and initiating programs for the development of the B-52 bomber and the U-2 spy plane. His administration created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and passed legislation authorizing the construction of the interstate highway system. He extended many of the New Deal programs including support for public housing, extension of Social Security benefits and increases in the minimum wage. In short, Eisenhower helped the country transition to peace and he calmed the fears of the country, allowing it to move ahead and prosper.

[56] Oakley, 164.

CHAPTER 4

THE POST-WAR HOUSE

The post-war house embodied all that we held near and dear as a nation. Private ownership of a house and lot was the fulfillment of the dream of millions of Americans. While some warned they would become slums, the buyers ignored the nay-sayers and invested both energy and effort into making their houses homes.[57] The investments provided the opportunity to move upward through the social ranks to earn higher status via the accumulation of wealth provided by the appreciation in the value of the property. Increasing home ownership expanded the number of Americans who had a genuine economic and political stake in society.

The post-war house and suburbia became the dominant setting for family life and were reflected in popular culture as well. Home ownership became the credo for the average American.

Inspirations for the Post-War House

Post-war housing, like all housing, was derived from the best attributes of the most successful housing types that preceded it. Late Nineteenth century vernacular house types such as the Gabeled Ell, New South Cottages, and Shotgun houses along with the Cape Cod, Tudor, bungalow, and Prairie style, were influential for the post-war house; however, the Ranch style house was the overwhelmingly dominant inspiration. Many of the same basic characteristics were common in all of these examples. They were rectangular, had a gabled or hipped roof, and

[57]Ibid., 114.

were primarily one-story. They were horizontally oriented, functional, adaptable, simple, and conservative, as the least complicated structures were often identified as working class or lower middle class housing. Perhaps the most important common thread were the mythical qualities of American life and ideals associated with each of them.

The Cape Cod reminded us of the early pioneer days, when the country was literally being hacked out of the wilderness. We harkened back to the time when we were rugged individualists who were self-sufficient. There was a connection to New England, patriotism, the Revolutionary War, and the beginnings of the land of the free and the home of the brave. It could also be argued that the Cape Cod was the continuation of the earlier Colonial Revival style that had been extremely popular. The Prairie and Ranch houses reminded us of the great western expansion and the wide-open spaces of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. The bungalows and other vernacular house styles were functional and simple, appealing to our thrift and ingenuity. All reminded us of small towns and a simple life where all happiness comes from the family and owning your own home, and good things come from working the earth, dovetailing with the Jeffersonian ideal equating home ownership with family virtue, political stability and civic responsibility.

During the conservative years following the war, builders, bankers and designers were keen to promote the connections with the agrarian myth of the yeomen farmer and the patriotic themes of early colonial house types. Various home models were, and still are, given names like "Saratoga" and "Georgetown," not because they share architectural features of the houses located in those towns, but because the names are in keeping with the theme of celebrating America. "American homes for American people" was a theme guaranteed to please prospective buyers and those who held the mortgages. Modern designs appeared too much like the *dachas*

of communist Russia and were too un-American, thus suspect. Homebuyers wanted a home they could identify with.

As stated, the most significant and obvious of the inspirations came from the Ranch house, representing the ultimate in livability, comfort and convenience. Architects found it difficult to make a spreading, one-story house unattractive, although some succeeded. Most of these designs were based, at least in part, on one or more aspects of the Ranch; however, the Ranch house of the post-war period bore very little resemblance to its namesake. Ranches were long, rectangular-shaped houses without projections, breaks or wall changes, and designed to fit into the landscape of the southwest United States. Functional interior spaces were easily accessed from inside and outside. Glass abounded with vistas of the surroundings, allowing nature to paint its own picture in the windows. Many of the houses had u-shaped layouts, and spatial relationships implied informal living in a casual setting, complementing the family that loved the outdoors. Exteriors, usually masonry, were very plain, highly adaptable and easily ornamented.

Interest in the Ranch was due mainly to the explosion of interest in California that began during the war and continued during the post-war period. National attention sponsored in-depth coverage of lifestyles and cultural changes. Magazines, television, music and film acted as conveyors of those ideas and, while reflecting the realities of the post-war environment, mythologized life in California. The constant coverage meant that millions of Americans repeatedly read and heard about, and wanted to become a part of, the good life that was portrayed. A 1945 Life Magazine article predicted that the "California way of life…may in time

radically influence the pattern of life in America as a whole," as it offered "the most glowing example" of postwar "modern living."[58]

In particular, the Ranch house typified the outdoor leisure living most closely identified with California. This design represented the "new ideal of family" to homebuilders, advertisers, and buyers. If Americans couldn't move to California, they could live a suburban lifestyle that closely approximated the experience and move someplace like it, striving to achieve the picture of blissful suburbia of magazine portrayals. As the United States became a suburban nation, a "metropolitan tilt" matched the western one.[59]

Real estate developers advertised the "California living" concept to young baby boom families, a lifestyle focused on patios, barbecues, and swimming pools. The celebration and appeal of informal living, in fashion and in discourse, corresponded to ideas about the universality of middle-class membership and aspirations.[60] The California lifestyle held the golden promise of the family and the nation's future.

Homebuilders were keenly aware of the housing shortage facing returning veterans and the overwhelming desire to purchase instead of renting a home. One of the problems encountered was the absence of house plans providing the type of housing demanded. Fully aware of the conservative political climate, modest incomes of large numbers of homebuyers, and government programs increasing eligibility, architects and designers presented simple plans

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[58] Kirse Granate May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 11.

[59] James E. Vance, "Revolution in American Space Since 1945, and a Canadian Contrast , in *North America: the Historical Geography of a Changing Continent* ed. Robert D. Mitchell and Paul A. Groves, (USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987) 453, quoted in Kirse Granate May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 19.

[60] Richard B. Rice, *The Elusive Eden: A New History of California,* (New York: Knopf, 1988) 475, quoted in Kirse Granate May, *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture, 1955-1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 19.

that would meet all of the criteria of the interested parties but would leave many with a sour taste for the new houses.

Design and Construction

Architects designing post-war houses were charged with creating a house plan that was efficient, attractive, economical to build, and fulfilling to buyers, builders, and mortgage bankers. The designs had to provide quality, be affordable, and meet FHA and VA guidelines. Most architects abhorred the government regulations because the FHA evaluators would give lower ratings to modern designs indicating they were bad investments. In reality, the designs were just assemblages of the various elements. Two basic approaches to home building evolved during this period. The first was the traditional method of a builder constructing individual homes on separate parcels from custom or stock home plans. The second was the merchant builder who constructed thousands of homes from an assembled set of custom plans, repeating the same basic house *ad infinitum*.

The first method accounted for the majority of the post war projects I am personally familiar with and most projects undertaken in the Southeast. In many instances the builders designed the homes and had draftsmen put them in plan form so that they might be repeated several times. Obviously the homes they designed and built reflected the successful plans of other builders or noted architects such as Clifford May, and Charles and Henry Greene. In the Southeast, architects from the Sarasota school, founded by Ralph Twitchell and Paul Rudolph, and the North Carolina school, founded by Henry L. Kamphoefner greatly influenced modern design. Local Atlanta architects, Aeck and Associates, and Heery and Associates, influenced the

construction and design of Atlanta's high style architecture during the period. Builders following the latest trends could purchase plans of the most popular homes from several sources including W. D. Farmer, Home Builders Plan Service, Knox Homes, and National Homes.

Merchant building was most popular in the northeastern and western states primarily because of the population concentrations. The most recognized merchant builder is William Levitt, founder of several Levittowns. Other notables were Frank Saharp and American Community Builders.[61] The merchant builders usually developed a set of plans utilizing a basic design, then, by changing orientation or decorative elements, created a myriad of different models. A common complaint of these tract developments is the monotony of the homes. There were many stories of drunken residents supposedly stumbling into the wrong house because they all looked alike. Joseph Eichler, another merchant builder, took a slightly different approach in that he had several hundred different house designs so that he could provide greater variety in his developments.[62] The success of the merchant builders had a great impact nationwide as individual builders tried to emulate their success by copying their plans and construction methods. Both approaches had similar challenges.

Everyone agreed that the target market was the returning veteran. After all, he was one of almost 15 million, clamoring for a new home and, in most cases, having the ability to purchase. Affordability was the primary consideration. The Federal Government was promoting home ownership, had provided low interest mortgages with no down payment available through the GI Bill, and was financing homes for others through the FHA with similar terms. The middle class annual income was between $3,000 and $10,000,with the greatest number in the $3,500 to $7,500 range. Rental markets were examined by the Levitt brothers, determining that two

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[61] Wright, 248.
[62] Ned Eichler, *The Merchant Builders* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982) 68.

bedroom homes could be rented for approximately $52 per month and also determining that these units were the most in demand. They made the decision to build houses that could be sold for $7,500, or mortgaged for approximately $60 per month.[63] In doing so they would make homes available for the broadest segment of the market and be able to turn a profit. Banks and savings and loan institutions generally had a 2:1 loan ratio for income to mortgage; thus, anyone earning $3,750 per year, could buy a home.

A home designed primarily around this criterion had to be simple and easy to build. The result was a two-bedroom house with a kitchen, living room /dining room combination, and bathroom, on a concrete slab. Dimensions were consistent with the use of standardized lumber. and detail and ornamentation were kept to a minimum. The value of the home, not the aesthetic appeal of the architecture was paramount. It was successful and repeated thousands of times in tract developments and elsewhere.

The residential building and construction industry was turned upside down during the post-war period. Methods of construction and materials were at the root of the changes originated by the Levitt brothers. In traditional construction it was not uncommon for the same group of carpenters to frame, trim, finish, and install windows, doors, and cabinets. Almost everything was constructed on site with very little specialization or prefabrication. The Levitts viewed this as a very inefficient way of building a home, and since they had so many to build, they instituted the crew system and assembly line-type production. The work was divided into phases so that craftsmen could move from house to house completing their phase, keeping the construction process going. Some pre-assembly was done for plumbing fixtures and cabinetry. Truss systems allowed for greater spans while mass production decreased costs. These

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[63] Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: U New York P, 1993) 60.

techniques spread nationwide very quickly as even the smallest builder could see the advantages of this system of construction. Building houses became more profitable as the speed and efficiency of crews improved.

Changes in materials increased profitability, improved the quality of construction, and improved efficiency. Improved manufacturing techniques enhanced plywood, increasing its use as sheathing. Pre-hung windows and doors were being manufactured in greater numbers.[64] Superior glues and adhesives improved linoleum installations, while standardized lumber and gypsum wallboard made eight feet the uniform ceiling height.

Exteriors and Footprint

Men judged the acceptability and worth of a house based on its external appearance. It had to have "curb appeal" to get beyond the first glance or the drive-by investigation. Since it was customary for men to take the responsibility of making the home-buying decision, the greatest emphasis was placed on the exteriors. Room design, floor plan, and interior space took a backseat to site orientation, façade design, and landscaping.[65]

Early post war houses averaged 820 square feet, which is considerably less than the average house constructed in 1920. The FHA had approved a design for an economy model that had a mere 645 square feet.[66] As the post-war period wore on and the nation continued its prosperity, average house size increased to approximately 1,100 square feet as the typical house increased the number of bedrooms from two to three, additional bathrooms were added, and the

[64] Eichler, 70.
[65] Kelly, 75.
[66] Wright, 256.

sizes of living rooms and kitchens increased. Instead of rooms, the houses offered efficiency, and instead of workspace, they offered appliances.[67]

Post-war houses were built as lower-income class housing but marketed as middle-class houses primarily because the people who were buying them wanted to be part of the middle class. In reality, they were not much more than starter homes or what was traditionally considered working class housing. The political implications of identifying them as worker class would have been extremely negative. Even though the houses were extremely rudimentary, identifying them as middle class houses was more acceptable.[68] As family size increased, as financial situations improved, it was expected that the homeowner benefited from the acquired equity and moved to a larger home.

Relatively few early post-war houses were built with basements. The frequency of houses with basements depends to some degree, on the geographic region of the country. Most, however, were constructed on concrete slabs providing a smooth flat surface for interior floor finishes. Basements were costly to build and almost always a source of discontent for the builder and the homeowner, as it was difficult to prevent them from leaking and being damp. Basements had traditionally been a storage place for coal, wood, and steam equipment when those means of heating were used. Modern homes were being heated with natural gas, fuel oil, and electrical heaters that could be located in closets or attics. Where basements were included, they were primarily used for storage and recreation.

Continuous foundations usually supported houses not built on slabs. Materials used in foundations were generally poured concrete (Figure 5), or concrete block, with a brick or stone veneer. The use of a veneer on the foundation was often times the only characteristic

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[67] Clifford Clark, Jr., "Ranch House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities" in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* ed. Lary May (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1989) 185.

[68] Kelly, 153-154.

distinguishing one house from another. In other instances, it was a continuation of a treatment utilized somewhere else on the house.

Figure 5. Example of continuous masonry foundation.

Exterior cladding on houses tended to be some type of siding that would give them horizontal orientations. Designs rarely included any projections, leaving the planes of the house smooth and without interruption and making them ideal for this orientation. Government sponsored research into the uses of aluminum resulted in the use of metal clapboards in some areas. In most cases siding was a type of fiberboard or asbestos shingles formed to look like wood (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Example of asbestos shingle siding.

Very few homes had wooden siding or brick veneer because the cost would have increased the price of the house. In the warmer climates of Florida and California, stucco was often used. Masonry accents were commonly seen on foundations, and around windows and doors on the primary façade of the house. It was thought these details added a sense of permanence without significantly adding to the cost of the house. Wood shingles also were commonly used as an accent reminiscent of Queen Anne style houses. It was very popular and not uncommon to use a variety of materials in combination with one another to provide interest and uniqueness (Figure 7). Accenting the front of the house only is a regrettable practice that has been continued in the residential construction of today.

Figure 7. House with combination masonry accents.

A tradition of ornamenting and decorating the exteriors of residential buildings preceded the post-war period. Custom building at a much slower pace was most common with very little speculative construction. The prospective homeowner was allowed to make decisions regarding the features of the home throughout the process. The pace of construction after the war coupled with the overriding edict of affordability allowed little or no time for decisions about decoration and ornamentation. As a result, most homes had little or none, except those elements that were in keeping with the celebration of America. If ornamented, the most popular among builders and buyers were the "Early American" motifs which included door surrounds with pilasters, inoperable shutters, carriage lamps, and maybe a metal eagle painted black, hanging above the front door. They were modest, conservative, and inexpensive. These features permitted a demonstration of individual taste without being extreme or inappropriate for the neighborhood (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Example of carriage lamp at front entrance.

Exterior colors varied from very soft shades and muted tones to bright pinks and aqua. Colors generally varied by region, with brighter colors prevalent in the warmer climates. White with dark green or black shutters was favored in the Southeast, while earthtones were favored in the Midwest. Since the houses were so very similar, combinations of colors were used to differentiate one from the other. Individual expression could be achieved through the use of color, provided it was not too expressive.

Windows in the post-war house were usually double-hung wooden sash with a 6/6 light configuration; however, metal and jalousie windows were used extensively in warmer climates. The larger picture window was in the Chicago style, having a wide, solid pane of plate glass in the center surrounded by narrower lights with sashes (Figure 9). While some disliked the large windows, others used them to showcase their latest furnishings, gadgets, and appliance purchases to their neighbors.[69] Initially, windows on the front of the house were placed to achieve a symmetrical appearance, but later homes appeared with asymmetrical placement to accentuate the horizontal orientation. The placement of windows on the front had more to do with the

[69] Miller, 162.

earlier mentioned “curb appeal” than with interior arrangement. The remaining windows on the sides and rear of the house were usually placed in relation to the interior room arrangement. Windows provided much needed light and ventilation but also presented an open feeling that made the small rooms appear larger than they actually were.

Figure 9. House with Chicago Style window.

There were usually two or three entrances to the postwar house. The main entrance was on the front and consisted of a six-panel door of solid wood or a six-panel door with lights in the top two panels. The second entrance was through the kitchen and could be located on the side or rear of the house. The upper half of the kitchen door was often filled with glass either as a single light or divided into 6 or 9 lights, over a crossbuck design or solid bottom. The third entrance, if provided, was located in the rear of the house and opened into the “outdoor room.” Large, metal-framed, sliding glass doors were most common and opened to a patio or porch. The full-length glass afforded a view of the rear yard and brought the outside in.

Early post-war houses had neither carports nor garages, but the locations of new subdivisions required that families have automobiles to either commute directly to work or to the

train station and for shopping and social activities. As the market began demanding a place to store the newest "member of the family", attached single carports were included. The carport quickly became a storage area for all of the consumer goods a prosperous middle class was buying. It was a place to keep lawn equipment, a work area for auto repair or home improvement projects, and, when the car was gone, a play area for children. At times it also doubled as a covered picnic or recreation area. As more families purchased a second car for the woman of the house to fulfill her chauffer duties, the carport was enlarged. Eventually, the market demanded fully enclosed 2-car garages that would protect the family cars from rain and cold weather, and likewise could be used for all those other activities.

Roofs on the majority of post war houses were simple side gables covered with asphalt shingles. Minimal traditional cottages were often cross-gabled to form a prominent front gable. In areas where there is not much threat of winter snow, low-pitched hipped roofs were constructed. In both instances, the eaves of the house had little or no overhang save for the width of the gutter. Eaves were usually considered an unnecessary expense.

Plan and Interiors

When reviewing the design and layout of interior rooms, it is evident that the guiding factor was cost. The emphasis was on casual living, consumption, comfort, and relaxation. Earlier suburban homes were examined for design inspiration and analyzed for their functionality. All non-essential areas were removed and overlapping uses were combined (Figures 10, 11, and 12).

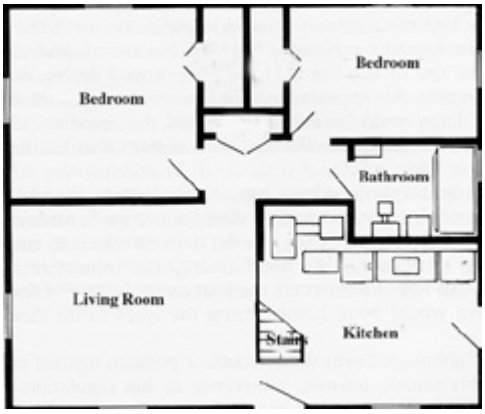

Figure 10. Typical floor plan, 1949.[70]

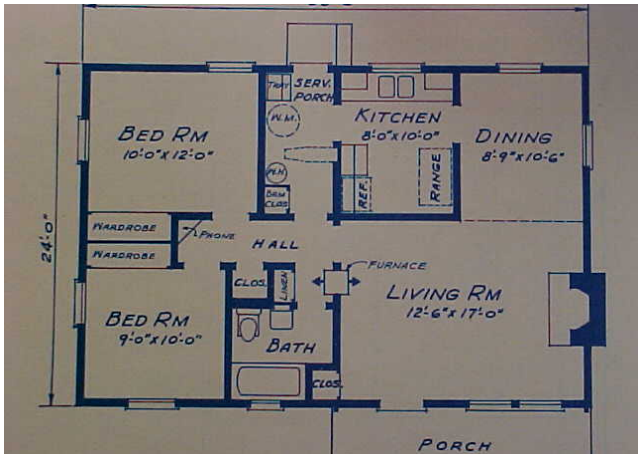

Figure 11. Typical floor plan, 1947.[71]

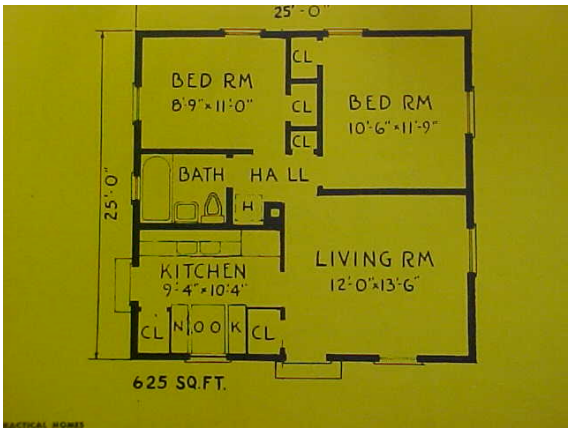

Figure 12. Typical floor plan, 1946.[72]

Following FHA guidelines for reduction instead of revision, what emerged was a reduced version of earlier homes that was a functional, convenient plan with little detail, accomplished by dividing the house into three living zones. The first was the work zone, centered on the kitchen; the second was the living/public area centered on the family room; and the third was the private area, centered on the bedrooms.

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[70] http://www.levittownhistoricalsociety.org/history3.htm.
[71] George J. Fosdyke, *Desireable Homes* (Culver City, California: Murray & Gee, Inc., 1947) 22.
[72] *Small Practical Homes* (Chicago: Industrial Publications, Inc., 1946) 15.

The work zone was where the business of running a household was conducted, fostering the happiness that came from working together to improve the home and the family. Centered on the relatively large kitchen, it was the utility core of the house. It was designed as the utility core for economic reasons (bundled plumbing) but served as the core for cultural reasons. The kitchen as core is found in many immigrant and working class cultures. Since many of the buyers' families were recent immigrants or could be categorized as working class, the kitchen naturally adopted this role and was used as an informal, semi-public gathering area for friends and family.[73] School age children used the kitchen table to complete homework and younger children played on the floor as the housewife went about her daily tasks. Sometimes a corner of this room was dedicated as the Dr. Spock inspired, "no rules area," where children could play freely, exercising their creativity by writing on the walls and such, without fear of correction. Children playing outside could be monitored from the many windows surrounding the room. The open wall and counter designs allowed them to be watched as they played in adjacent family rooms.

The kitchen was designed to be modern and efficient, particularly if the housewife was to make time for her children and husband. Built-in cabinets replaced the usual mix of cupboards. Linoleum covered the floor and impervious countertops; sinks and cabinets were designed for easy cleaning and maintenance. Fluorescent lighting was employed to create better illuminated spaces for working and personal hygiene. The latest appliances were available and it was possible to include them in the mortgage. Marketing of these appliances was done to the husband in terms of mechanical ability and efficiency, making the house more livable (Figure 13).

[73] Kelly, 68.

Figure 13. Kitchen with toddler play area and latest appliances.[74]

It was obvious to women that men had designed the kitchen area without consulting a woman. Cabinet, sink, and appliance placements were not conducive to a smooth flow of work. The location of the laundry was particularly troubling since doing laundry and preparing meals were tasks at odds with one another (Figure 14).

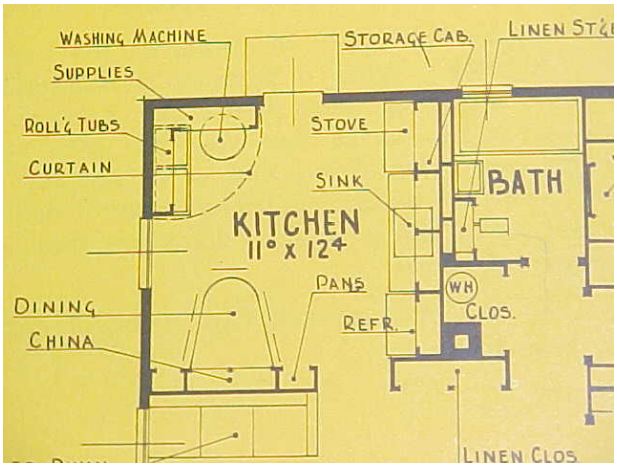

Figure 14. Plan showing washing machine in kitchen.[75]

[74] *Small Practical Homes* (Chicago: Industrial Publications, Inc., 1946) 106.
[75] Ibid., 2.

Women preferred the laundry to be closer to the bedrooms and bath, where laundry was generated. Men later redesigned this feature without listening to what women were saying, doing what they thought best by creating a separate laundry room.[76]

Living activities and public reception occurred in the combination living room, dining room, and entrance. To reduce building costs these three areas were combined. Dining had become more casual and occurred most often in the kitchen, and since there was more emphasis on the casual relationships between neighbors; there was no need for guests to wait in an entrance hall. All of the living activities of the house were concentrated in this area.

Earlier middle class houses had separate living area for adults and children and separate areas for men and women. Parents could retreat to studies or formal living rooms to read or converse. Children were relegated to the kitchen, bedrooms or outdoors. There was intended to be little interaction between adults and children, particularly between the father and the child. Post-war housing and shifts in gender roles changed all of that. Partly because there was no space, and partly because a greater emphasis was being placed on men's roles as parents, the family began spending lots of time together and doing more and more things together. Marriages were considered companionate. Board games enjoyed renewed interest. Families and friends gathered to watch television; even though there were only three channels, you could find something everyone could watch. Televisions, like appliances, could be included in the mortgage if they were built-in to the cabinetry or walls. The living room eventually became the "family" room, in keeping with the child-centered middle class culture. Reduction in the amount of formal space is a direct reflection of the continuing trend towards casual living and the increasing importance of recreation, leisure, and family "togetherness."

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[76] Kelly, 97.

Bedrooms and bathrooms constituted the private areas. Rooms were generally small but functional, satisfying the basic needs of the family. Two-bedroom houses sold well in the early post-war years primarily because the families were young and had not had time for multiple children. Parents were encouraged not to let children sleep with them past the toddler age, so two bedrooms was the minimum needed. The other reason was, of course, financial: two bedrooms allowed you to realize the American Dream; three bedrooms would not.

One bathroom positioned near the bedrooms sufficed. Bathroom walls and floors were usually a combination of porcelain tiles and linoleum. Placement a few feet away from the family room allowed it to be a public area when necessary. People quickly desired the addition of a second bathroom to be accessed from the master bedroom. The addition of the second restroom would further separate the public and private spaces.

Standard ceiling heights throughout the houses were eight feet, and rooms were generally dimensioned in multiples of four feet to accommodate standardized lumber and wallboard sizes. Most rooms had little or no trim moulding. Interior finishes allowed for personal expressions. The color schemes varied but were similar to the exterior colors. Most buyers wanted paint that was washable and easy to maintain, leading to the widespread use of glossy enamels.

Landscaping

Average lot sizes varied, depending on the region of the country and on the circumstances of the development. Where sewer systems were not available, septic tanks and drainfields had to be used, requiring larger lots. Most lots were not very big; usually less than a half-acre. In any event, the homeowner could satisfy his desire to be outdoors and to work with the soil.

Landscaping in post-war housing developments was very minimal, confined mostly to lawns and street tree plantings such as Levitt's 40,000 fruit trees.[77] The homeowner was required to improve his lot and provide the necessary beautification to help make a house a home. Men were primarily interested in landscaping because the outward appearance of the property added to, or detracted from, their status in the neighborhood. Aside from aesthetics, the landscape added additional living space to the house. Patios became a bridge of sorts from the house into the yard, and the yard gave families a place to spend their leisure and recreation time. Large picture windows, designed to bring the outdoors in, meant that the outdoors should be inviting.

Landscape architects of the period, such as Thomas Church and Garrett Eckbo, were challenged to develop designs that could achieve the transition of interior and exterior and create a sense of unity between the two. Most owners of the typical post-war house could not have afforded the services of a landscape architect, but they did look at the designs in magazines and the yards of wealthier neighborhoods, copying the designs they liked. Emphasis on human use of outdoor spaces resulted in many hardscape projects including patios, decks and fountains for parties, barbecues and get-togethers. Designs using plant material were relatively simple but attempted to soften the harshness of the house fronts. Foundation plants were also used as they are today: to blend the house into the landscape, to add some character to the individual house, and to relieve the monotony of the whole development.

The House at Levittown

A discussion of the post-war era would not be complete without mention of Levittown. There were actually three Levittowns, with Long Island being the most famous and identifiable.

[77] Wright, 253.

The other towns were located in New Jersey and near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Built by Abraham Levitt and his sons Alfred and William, Long Island accounted for over 17,500 homes between 1947 and 1951[78] (Figure 15).

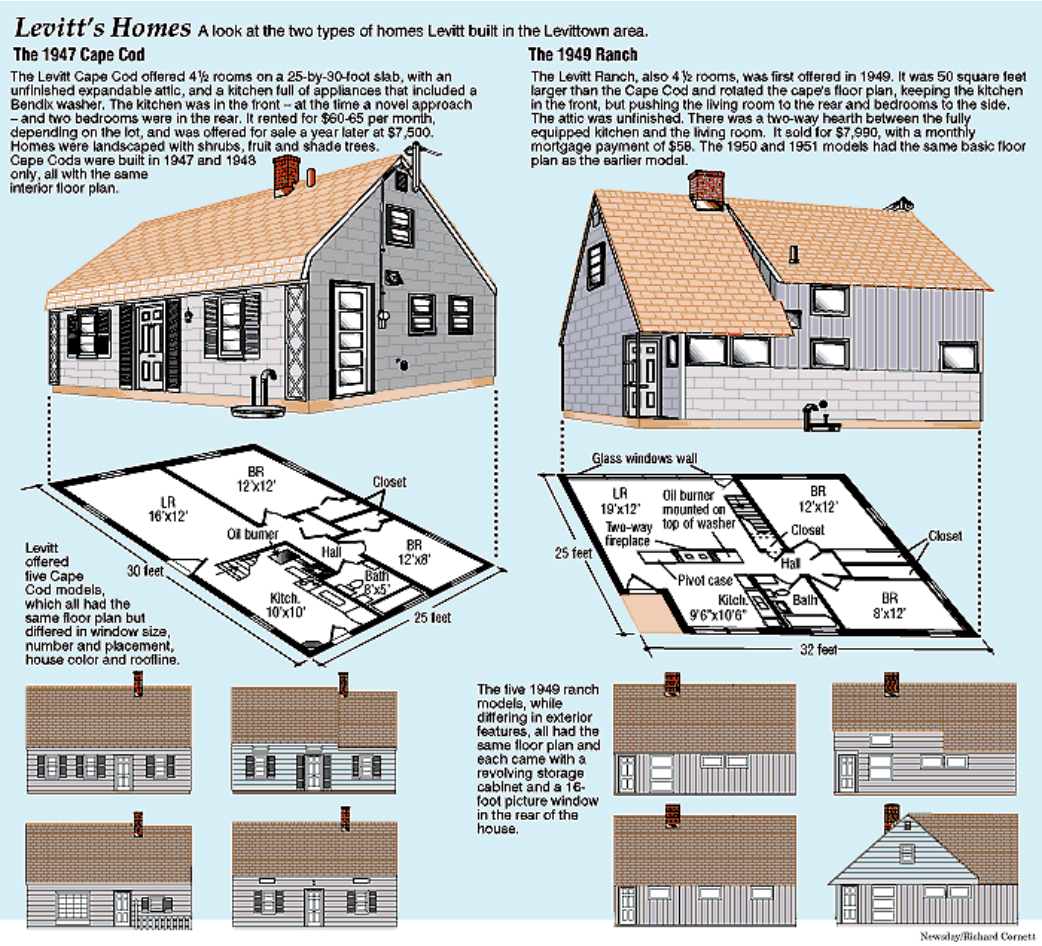

Figure 15. Elevation and plan of Levitt's houses.[79]

When suburbia is mentioned, visions of Levittown come to mind. What we see is row after row of almost identical houses located on gently winding streets that always end in cul de sacs. Levittown has been the inspiration for songs, books, cartoons, and how not to plan a

[78] Kelly, 17.
[79] http://www.newsday.com/extras/lihistory/specsec/glevi28.htm

community. Good or bad, Levittown has had a profound effect on the development of suburbs and housing in this country.

The Levitts were, in fact, visionaries and opportunists. They foresaw the great housing shortages after the war and had the means and business sense to act quickly on their instincts. Before 1947 they were involved in building homes that were marketed to upper middle class buyers who could afford the more opulent homes they had built in the 1930's. When the housing shortages became known, they immediately purchased land and erected 2,000 Cape Cod houses for rent. They then built an additional 4,000 to be sold. Eventually all of the rental houses were sold to their tenants as home buying became more affordable than renting. They sold their houses for $7,500, taking advantage of the recent legislation favoring mortgage loans to veterans and guaranteeing mortgages for low-cost housing built to FHA standards, signing over 1400 contracts in one day.[80]

Building large numbers of houses required great effort in coordinating the work of all of the trades. In grappling with these difficulties, the Levitts revolutionized the building industry. They were the fathers of the "crew" method that used crews specializing in certain aspects of construction. They developed a 26-step process that so streamlined and ordered the construction of their homes, that over the course of the development of Levittown, on average, a home was finished every eleven minutes.[81] Another new idea in labor relations was the hiring of labor as sub-contractors, thereby enabling the Levitts to pay below union scale wages. Other cost saving measures employed were buying directly from manufacturers, making nails on site, and investing in a California forest to insure against lumber shortages.

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[80] Wright, 252.
[81] Kelly, 189.

There were two basic house styles. The Cape Cod was built in 1947 and 1948. The Ranch model, although it does not fit more recent definitions of a Ranch Style house, was the only model available after 1949. Both homes had two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and an unfinished attic. Some of these homes had basements, and later homes had garages or carports. They were heated using radiant heat in the tile-covered floors. The kitchens and bathrooms featured built-in cabinets that were the same brand as ones used in the White House kitchen.

The beauty of the Levitt houses was their ability to satisfy the wants and needs of the post war consumer. They maximized the available space, provided the buyer with the most modern conveniences, were well constructed, and met all of the criteria necessary to make them suitable for government backed loans. The Levitts accomplished all of this while, at the same time, making home ownership a reality for the average American family. The houses were not architecturally distinctive, nor were they particularly aesthetically pleasing. However, given the political and social climate of the times, they helped to strengthen the post-war economy, reinforce the American way of life and solidly entrench home ownership as an attainable part of the American Dream. The Levitts are singled out as significant contributors because of the number of people affected by their developments. They also had a tremendous impact on other builders and developers, as their ideas and plans were copied in every part of this country.

CHAPTER 5

CONCERNING PRESERVATION

Post-war houses and the development of suburbia will be forever linked. Both have been the target of much ridicule for ruining land and being oppressively monotonous. There are thousands of subdivisions and millions of post-war houses, many of which are eligible for consideration for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Much concern has been expressed about this topic and many questions exist about appropriate treatment of this resource.

Challenges and Recommendations

A primary challenge for preservationists is to first educate or convince the public that the post-war house and post-war suburb are significant historic resources, worthy of preservation efforts under criterion "A" of the National Register of Historic Places criteria for evaluation. Every aspect of the post- war housing development phenomenon is historic in its nature, beginning with the very first ideas for a house plan and continuing through to the sales of the finished product. When comparing the broad patterns of our history during the post-war period to other periods, rarely have so many influences directly impacted the development of a housing type, and never has a housing type so influenced future history.

It is estimated that 3,000 acres per day were being bulldozed to prepare for new subdivisions during the height of the post-war period.[82] William Levitt bragged that he was completing a house every 11 minutes. Typical pre-war subdivision development meant dozens

[82] Miller, 134.

of new houses. Post war developments had hundreds or even thousands. Home construction surpassed the automobile industry in percentage of GNP in 1954. Pre-war developments were viewed as parts of a greater community development, however the public perceived these new developments as separate communities unto themselves. Partly due to the size of the developments, they were frequently the products of comprehensive planning, including FHA review, not seen in earlier developments. FHA planning models often mirrored key features of the pre-war suburbs further enhancing the eventual new developments. The population of the United States has more than doubled since 1940 and if only considering the increase between 1940 and 1970, it is possible that over 50 million Americans have lived in a post-war house and suburb.

Edge development was not necessarily new, except for the scale. Demands for space and housing during the industrialization of America's cities led to the location of the rich and middle class on the city periphery. Likewise, saturated commercial districts forced some retailers out of the city center. Post-war growth patterns, while distinctly metropolitan in nature, are an outgrowth of more traditional patterns and practices.[83]

The reluctance of preservationists to place the post-war house on a par with the Greek Revival or Queen Anne Style houses is understandable but narrow minded. Those styles were direct reflections of the economic, social, and governmental influences of the day, as is the post-war house. The beauty, significance, and identity of the earlier homes lie in their detail, ornamentation, and craftsmanship. Conversely, the identity of the post-war house is derived from its lack of detail and ornamentation. To many, the lack of aesthetic value is reason enough to ignore post-war houses as significant resources. Part of the problem is that we often do not

[83] Richard Longstreth, "I Can't See It: I Don't Understand It; And It Doesn't Look Old to Me," *Forum Journal* 10 (Fall 1995) no. 1: 3-12.

"see" the historic resources. The houses are not sited as earlier houses were and the post-war house cannot be understood or appreciated from seeing one or two exterior elevations. Movement around and through the building is essential to grasp the qualities of its design.

Individual recognition of post-war houses should be pursued with great caution and exhaustive research establishing the integrity of only those truly outstanding examples that have been unaltered and retain all of their historic fabric, including floor coverings. Detailed analysis of the building's formal design attributes including form, space, scale, materials, and detailing should be conducted during the review. Each structure under consideration should be evaluated according to the following six criteria:

> 1. Technological merit: Does the work employ innovative modern technology to solve structural, programmatic, or aesthetic challenges?
>
> 2. Social merit: Does the design reflect the changing social patterns of twentieth century life? Did the designer attempt to improve either living or working conditions, or human behaviors through the works form or function?
>
> 3. Artistic and Aesthetic merit: Does the work exhibit skill at composition, handling of proportion, scale, material, and detail?
>
> 4. Cannonic merit: Is the work and/or architect famous or influential? Is it exemplary work?
>
> 5. Referential Value: Did this work exert an influence on subsequent designers as a result of one or more of its attributes?
>
> 6. Integrity: Is the original design apparent? Have material changes been made which compromise the architectural integrity of the structure or site?[84]

The distinguishing characteristics of the post-war suburban development establish the basis for preservation efforts of a district. Since the developments were created as a whole, the idea of preserving this resource by only saving a portion does not afford the development its due consideration and is an undesirable alternative. In addition to the residential lots, many of these

[84] http//www.docomomo-us.org/buildings_6_point_criteria.shtml.

developments consisted of parcels for commercial, civic, recreational, and educational activities, and are key in determining significance. In these instances, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and should be treated as such. Application of the above-mentioned criteria, when considering district designation, should prove to be a valuable tool in making that determination.

Identifying appropriate courses of action when reviewing applications for Certificates of Appropriateness, for these resources will be challenging. Because these houses were, and still are considered starter homes, they have characteristically been altered, or added to, as the needs and desires of the various owners changed. Questions arise concerning preservation of original fabric, but more importantly, concerning the retention of significance. Since it was common for new home-buyers to borrow additional money for improvements, changes have in some instances, attained historic significance of their own. Each local jurisdiction must chart its own course concerning matters of interpretation and application of design guidelines, however greater flexibility in selection and use of materials may be necessary when granting COA's for additions or replacement of exterior cladding, due the fact that much of the material used in the original fabric is now considered hazardous to health and environment.

Finally, preservation of mid twentieth century buildings have caused much debate. Items of debate include adaptation of buildings designed for specific functions (i.e. jails), preservation of buildings designed for short life-spans, effects of pollutants on materials, poor workmanship, improper application of new materials, treatment of hazardous materials, and recognition of significance. There has been a tendency to treat twentieth century buildings differently from those of earlier periods. Now that we have left the twentieth century there may be an artificial,

but important psychological break that will enable the preservation of places from the more recent past to be approached with the same regard for their fabric as earlier historic buildings.[85]

Preservation is about managing change. How that change is managed depends on the current level of knowledge and the community's support, and the challenge for preservationists is to help communities recognize the value of recent cultural heritage to make sure there is enough political support to ensure that it is the significance of the place that guides the change.[86]

[85] http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/2002/20th2002.htm.
[86] Ibid.

Table 1. Preservation Recommendations

- Local preservationists should become pro-active in educating the public and current post-war homeowners of the historic significance of the resource.
- Individual recognition and historic designation should be reserved for only those truly outstanding examples of the post-war house.
- When designating historic districts, include entire subdivisions instead of certain blocks or neighborhoods.
- More flexibility in Historic District Design Guidelines rules governing material changes in appearance.

Table 2. Six Point Criteria for Evaluation of Significance

1. Technological Merit:
Does the work employ innovative modern technology to solve structural programmatic, or aesthetic challenges?

2. Social Merit:
Does the design reflect the changing social patterns of Twentieth century life? Did the designer attempt to improve either living or working conditions, or human behaviors through the work's form or function?

3. Artistic and Aesthetic Merit:
Does the work exhibit skill at composition, handling of proportion, scale and material and detail?

4. Cannonic Merit:
Is the work and/or architect famous or influential? Is it exemplary work?

5. Referential Value:
Did this work exert an influence on subsequent designers as a result of one or more of its attributes?

6. Integrity:
Is the original design intent apparent? Have material changes been made which compromise the architectural integrity of the structure or site?

CONCLUSION

The post-war housing boom lasted approximately 15 years and produced approximately 15 million houses. It gave birth to suburbia and the automobile-dependant nation we are today, and it gave birth to a new middle class that was larger, and more powerful economically and politically, than any other. Our views concerning long-term debt and the relationships between men, and women, and their children, were changed dramatically.

Housing debate has become a part of every Congressional session as the influences and impacts of government intervention into the housing industry are continuing to be felt today. The goal of decent housing for all Americans was inculcated into the policies of state and federal governments and has been a recurring theme in national political campaigns since the adoption of the Housing Act of 1949.

Economic, social, and governmental influences combined to result in the post-war house. The houses were simple, functional, efficient, and above all, affordable. The "American Dream" was realized by millions of Americans who probably would never have been able to do so had it not been for the unique combination of circumstances in the years following World War II. Even though the post-war house and developments such as Levittown have been the scorn of sociologists, preservationists, and planners, we identify more with these houses than with their predecessors.

Finally, the post-war house and the post-war suburb demand our attention as preservationists because they represent an extraordinary chapter in the history of the built

environment. By the 1960's, costs of construction and land acquisition made duplicating a post-war suburb too expensive, especially for the market that purchased the original product. As are other historic properties, the post-war house and suburb are non-renewable resources that we cannot afford to squander. Failure to recognize their significance and failure to advocate for their inclusion among other historic properties is to say that much of our current and future residential structures are, or will be, disposable.

I believe in the historic significance of the post-war house and agree with Richard Longstreth's assertion that the post-war suburb is the ideal staging ground for new initiatives that can broaden preservation's agenda and expand the scope of influence to have truly decisive impacts.

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