

## CHAPTER 1

# New Houses and New Communities

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

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

subdivisions outside the old city centers and older suburban rings of settlement.<sup>2</sup> By 1970, more than 20 percent of the entire population of the United States lived in tract houses, which occupied at least three million acres of newly developed land. A great many of us still live in these places.

I focus on twelve tract house developments in a range of sizes, built by nine builder-developers in four metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago.<sup>3</sup> I chose these builders and developments to illustrate the varieties of builders' careers and enterprises, their varied design procedures, and the different ways the development and planning process took place in larger and smaller tracts, and in different regions of the country. Although regionalism played a part in the design of the earliest builders' houses and communities of the postwar period, I also show that later houses and subdivisions offered a mix of regional aspects and wider influences. With the exception of Panorama City in Los Angeles, built by Fritz Burns, these tract house developments are discoveries of my own: scholars have not yet written about them, nor have their builders been studied. Yet several of these twelve settlements are huge (each more than a thousand dwellings), and their builders were among the most innovative of their time.

From among the original buyers of houses within the twelve developments, I have been able to contact and interview twelve families; this has provided me with many insights into the lives, motives, and attitudes of the first generation of buyers.

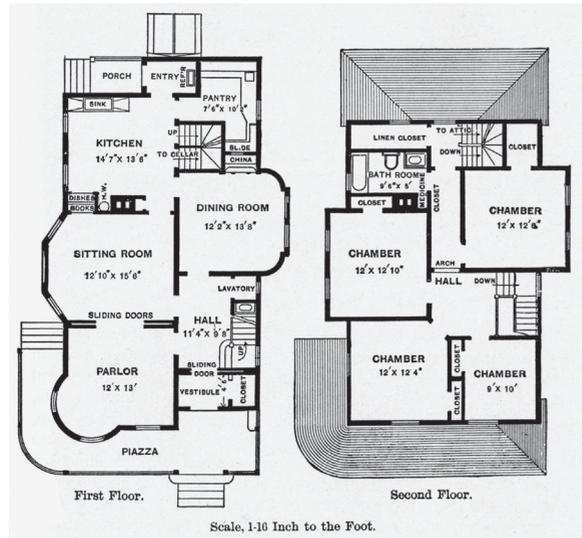
The new dwellings and their new communities provided housing for vast numbers of young couples and their young children, together with a host of others: people who were moving away from older crowded neighborhoods or who were leaving the farm for a new kind of urban life. These were veterans and their families, people who had worked in war industries, and many, many others whose older ties to place and group had been loosened in wartime while their aspirations (and prosperity) had increased. These new buyers were responding to the severe housing shortage created by depression and war, and their needs for housing were greatly increased by their new and growing families. (The birthrate skyrocketed from the 1940s to the mid-1960s.)<sup>4</sup> Long lines of new buyers converged on model houses: contemporary observers spoke of buildings "selling like hotcakes" (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

Making possible the new houses and their new communities were four major events: the rapid spread of automobile ownership among American families after the war; the rise of a new highway system; the institution of low-interest long-term government loans, especially for veterans; and a new prosperity for lower-income people. The Interstate Highway System that was signed into law under President Eisenhower in 1956 and intended at least partly as a defense measure during the Cold War was based on a national system going back to the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> This system



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

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

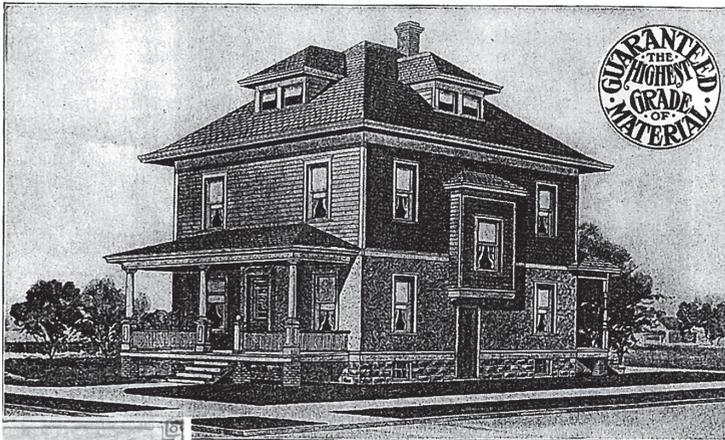


2. The George and J. P. Kingston House, Worcester, MA, ca. 1897, exterior. *Modern American Dwellings*, 49–51.

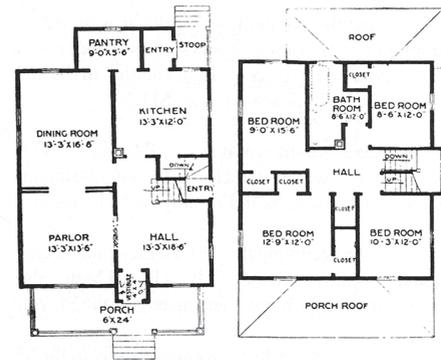
3. Kingston House, Worcester, MA, ca. 1897, *Modern American Dwellings*, plan.

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

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



MODERN HOME No. 111



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

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

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

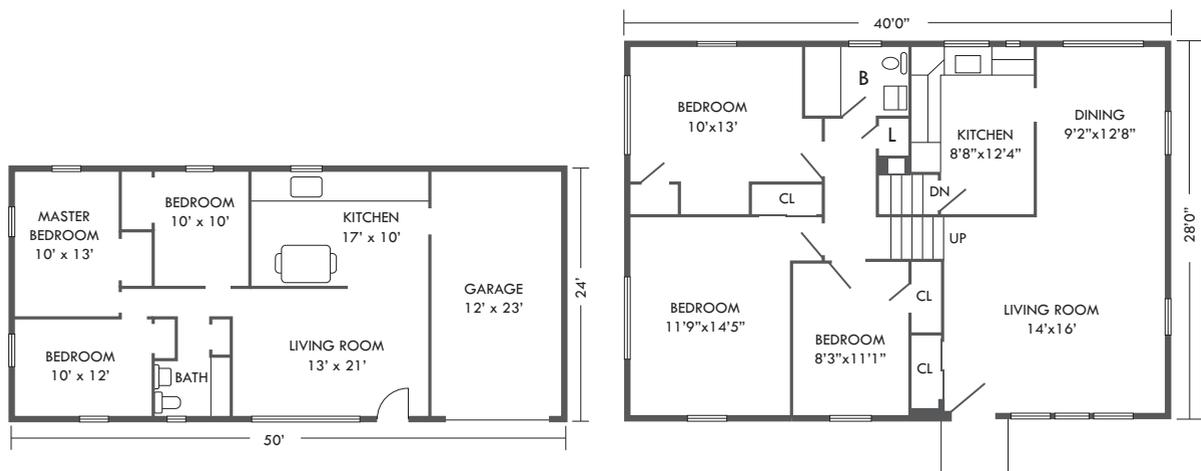
5. Sears Roebuck House, "The Chelsea," 1908, exterior and plan. *Sears Roebuck Modern Homes*, 30.



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

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





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

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

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

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

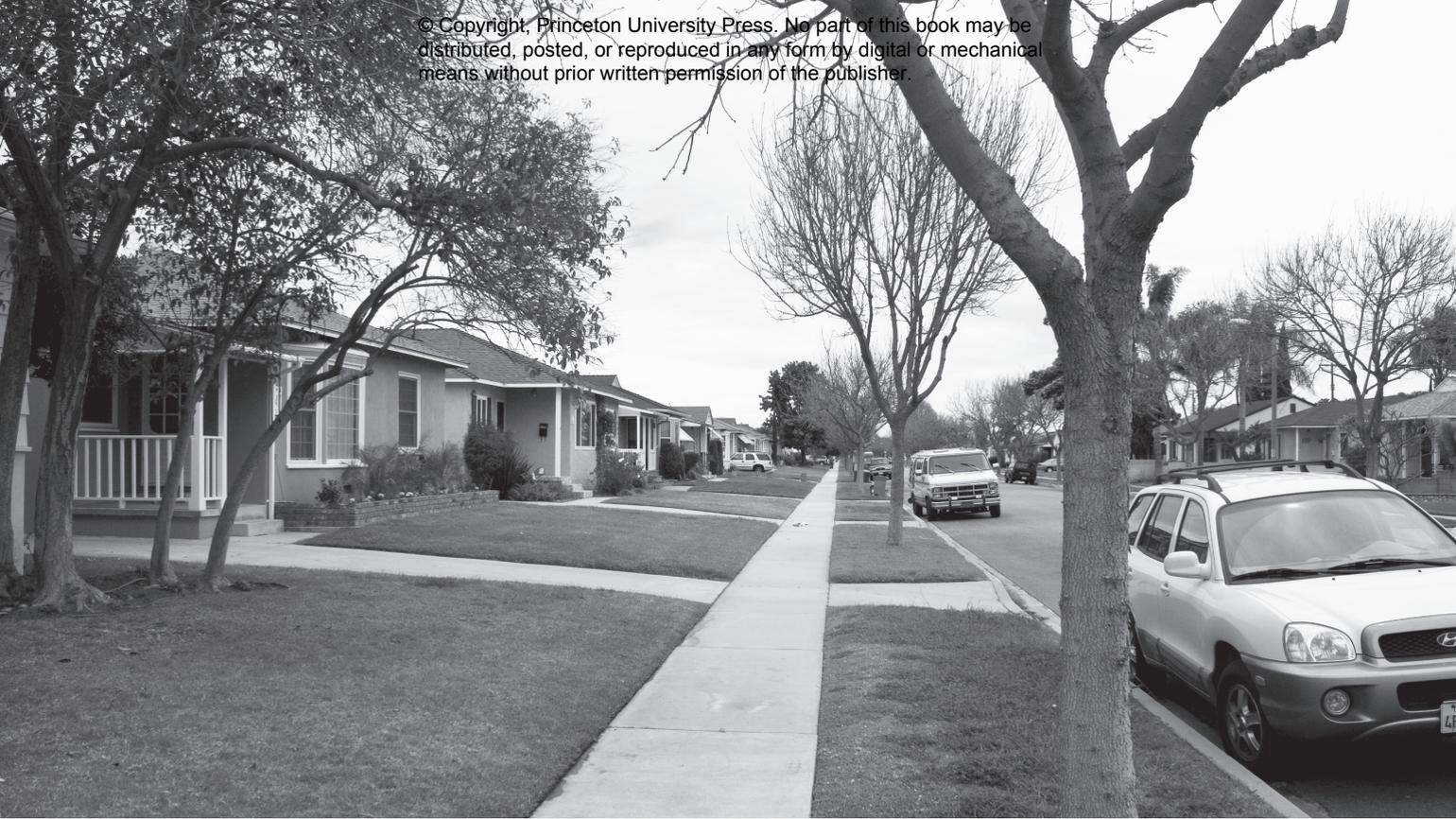
almost continuous along the street, a parallel verge along streets and sidewalks, with a cross-pattern created by driveways rather than front walks. Grass strips between the sidewalk and the curb formed a further complementary pattern, punctuated by trees.<sup>11</sup> The large front windows invited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

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

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

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

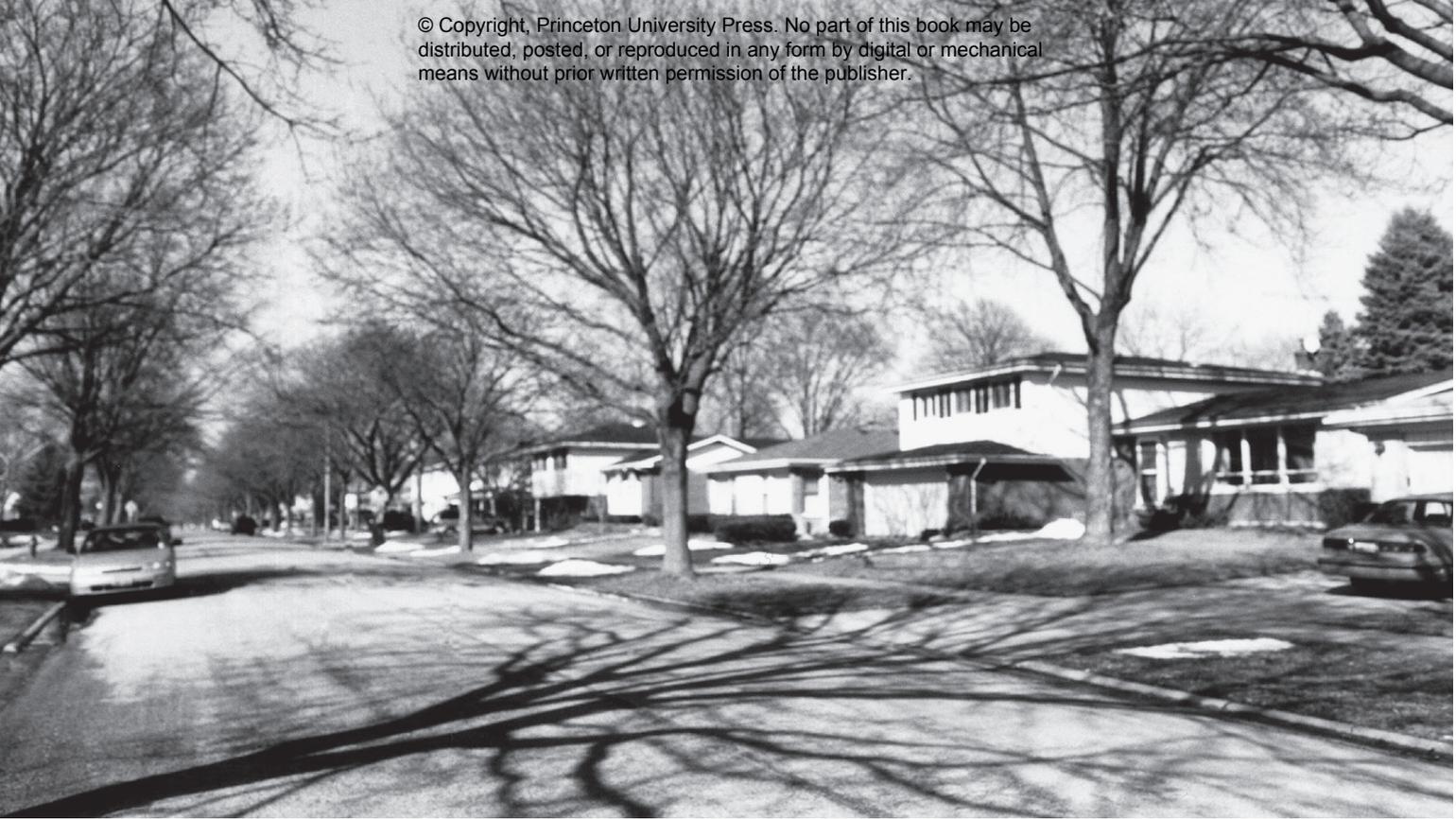




Back yards complemented the front by offering another continuous swath of greenery: there were few fences or hedges in the rear yards in the early years. Here the property was deeper—perhaps sixty feet—so there was room for planting trees and for some elaboration of recreation areas: a patio and sometimes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

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

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



14. Stoltzner Builders, Greenvue subdivision, Arlington Heights, IL, modern street view. Photo by Jonathan Lane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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

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

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

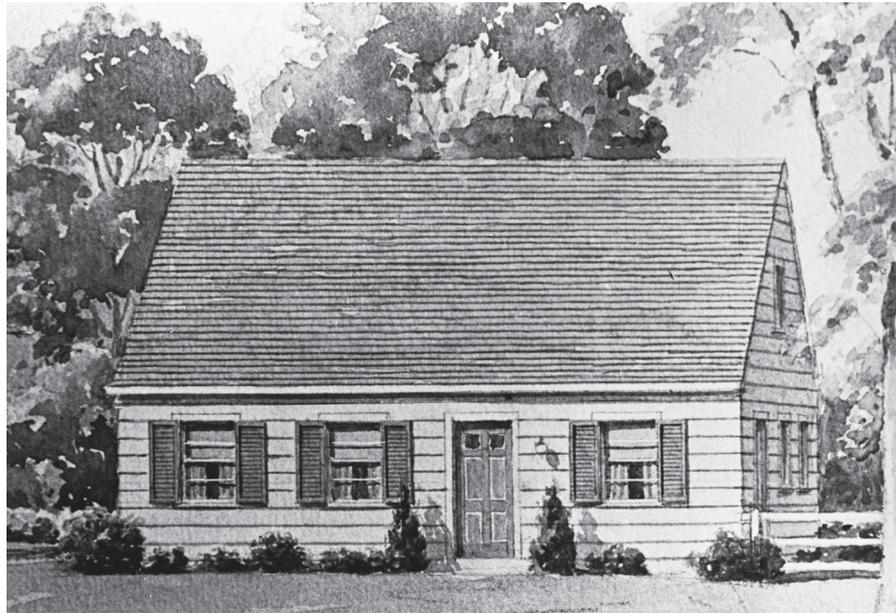
surrounded. Outside Boston and Philadelphia, smaller builders developed their own curvilinear patterns, which of course did not “fit” those of the larger communities, and did not create a sense of continuity either. Quite soon, as the older lacunae were filled, each of these metropolitan centers was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

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

## The Evolution of Ranch and Split-Level Houses

The houses built by tract developers can be described as having five different types, the first three rapidly outdistanced by the last two. The Levitt “Cape,” or Cape Cod cottage, of 1947 (fig. 18) was a simple, tiny, box-like affair, with 750 square feet of living space,<sup>13</sup> on a 6,000-square-foot lot (0.14 acres). Two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen occupied the ground floor space; above was a partial attic that owners could remodel into an extra room or two, it was said. As in all the early postwar Levitt houses, the kitchen was located at the front, an innovation in house planning, but not one that most builders adopted. Built primarily for rental units, the Levitt Cape bore a strong resemblance to the schematic drawings of the “minimum house” published in the FHA handbooks from 1936 onward (see fig. 41).

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

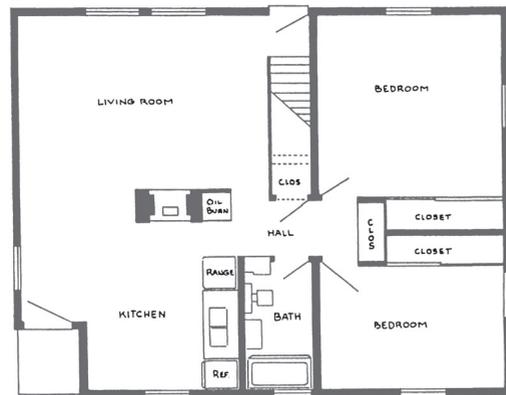


18. Levitt Brothers, “Cape Cod” model, Levittown, NY, 1947, exterior. Nassau County Department of Parks, Recreation & Museums.

in Levittown, New York, that was built for sale (rather than for rent); Bill Levitt designed it himself, he said, by having the workmen construct a model, then tearing it down and starting over, a process that took several tries.<sup>14</sup> The Levitt “ranch” was somewhat larger than the Cape, and the upper level was a little roomier, easier to expand (figs. 19, 20). The house was extremely popular, and frequently imitated (actually often replicated by imitators) in the early 1950s, especially by builders in the Northeast, who usually added a garage. The early Levitt house types were built on concrete slabs with radiant heating, as were their imitations.

The houses built at Lakewood in Los Angeles in huge numbers between 1950 and 1953 form another type, common in the West in the first years of the fifties. The Lakewood houses were part of one of the largest postwar housing developments: builders S. Mark Taper, Ben Weingart, and Louis Boyar constructed 17,500 houses on more than 3,000 acres between 1950 and 1953. The two-bedroom, 800-square-foot model sold for \$7,575 to \$8,225 in 1950 (\$68,538–74,419 in 2010 dollars).<sup>15</sup> The houses were modeled on those built on smaller parcels in the late forties by Taper and Boyar.<sup>16</sup> There were many plan variations among the models: most of the earliest houses at Lakewood had a detached garage at the rear; later, an attached garage was added (figs. 21, 22). Exteriors were finished in stucco.

Soon, however, these early house types were virtually supplanted by two others, the mature “ranch house” and the “split-level” house. The typical ranch of the 1950s had one story. It was long and spread out and thus required a wider lot



(sixty to seventy feet) than had been common in the 1940s and earlier. Its roof was sometimes flat, but more commonly it had a gently sloping gable or hip shape. The ranch house appeared in many variations, from rather rustic-looking versions on the West Coast, to a brick “bungalow look” in the Midwest, to a version in the East that hinted at colonial traditions. Nearly always it faced the street, with the living room at the front and a view from the living room toward the street through some version of a picture window (fig. 23). With the growing practice of attaching a garage, the overall profile of many ranch houses changed from simple and rather slab-like in the early fifties to an L-shaped plan in the later 1950s, the ell accommodating the garage. Or alternatively the attached garage prolonged the street front of the building, leading to a strongly horizontal emphasis. (By the end of the fifties, most garages were large enough for two cars.)

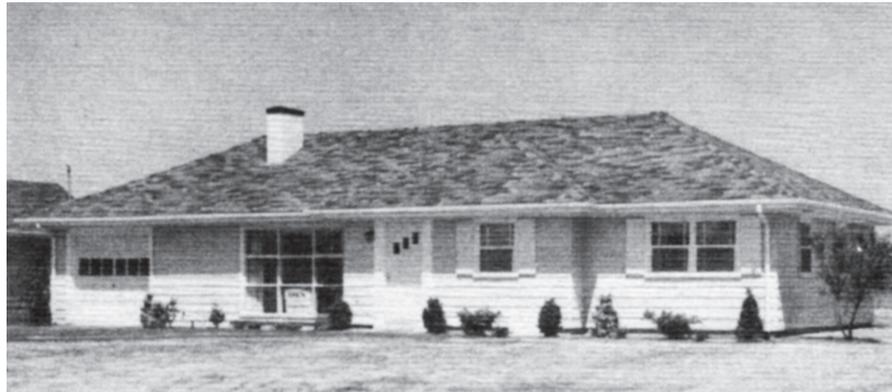
The ranch house type had a long evolution within American housing history, and in the fifties it came to be overwhelmingly preferred among builders and new homebuyers. I will trace something of its history in the section on Fritz Burns in chapter 2. The split-level was rather different. It normally had three

19. Levitt Brothers, “Ranch House” model, Levittown, NY, 1949, exterior. Nassau County Department of Parks, Recreation & Museums.

20. Levitt Brothers, “Ranch House,” Levittown, NY, 1949, plan. Nathanael Roesch, from Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream*.

21. Lakewood, CA, early house, ca. 1950, modern view, exterior. Photo by the author.

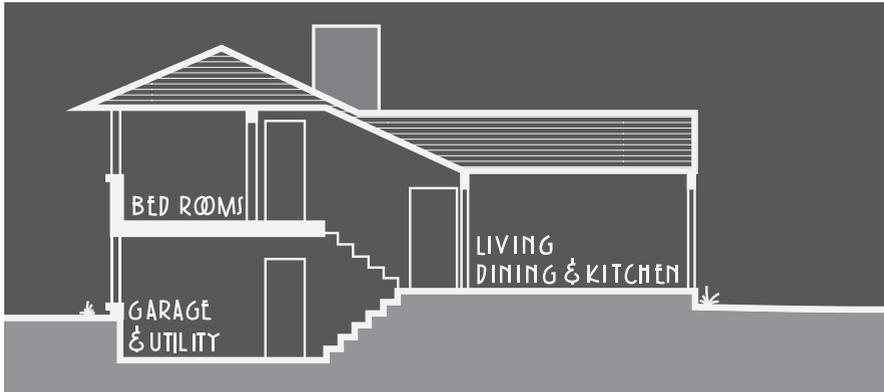
22. Lakewood, CA, builder’s sales brochure, model 30, plan, ca. 1950. City of Lakewood.



23. Campanelli Brothers, "The Warwick," Governor Francis Farms, RI, builder's sales brochure, 1955. Henry A. L. Brown.

levels: a basement level on a slab, containing the garage, a utility enclosure, and sometimes a small "den"; then, half a level up, the living room and kitchen; then, another half level up, the bedrooms and bath (usually over the garage) (fig. 24). This arrangement allowed a smaller footprint than that of the ranch, perhaps 50 percent smaller for a house of comparable square footage (figs. 8, 9). The smaller footprint meant that much narrower lots could be employed, often fifty feet. The split-level was originally developed for hilly ground, where the first-level garage could be cut into the hill while the main level did not rise very far above the street. But as the type spread and became more popular, builders erected split-levels on flat ground as well, heaping up earth to help provide the "cut" for the garage and basement level. Or when the site sloped steeply away from the street, what was visible from the front looked like a one-story ranch; two half levels down in the rear were the garage at the bottom and the bedrooms at midlevel (see fig. 112).

Like the ranch, the split faced the street, with a view through a large picture window. Being smaller in footprint, and needing more internal space for stairs, it usually contained smaller rooms. Entry was directly into the living room; stairs then acted partially as hallways, leading directly to bedrooms and bath above and garage and utilities below. In all its versions, the split-level seemed more closed off from the outdoors than the ranch (where one could often see through the house to the backyard from the living room), more focused on its interior spaces (despite the fact that advertisements and salesmen touted it as providing "indoor-outdoor living"), which were spatially somewhat more dynamic because of their vertical organization. Like the ranch, the split appeared in several variations, sometimes looking a bit like a "colonial" two-story, sometimes somewhat like the modern "A-line" house with an asymmetrical roof, and sometimes (in Chicago) somewhat reminiscent of the midwestern masonry bungalow (figs. 25, 26).<sup>17</sup> Although in the early to mid-fifties split-levels were usually exceptionally small, with growing popularity they swelled in size, and their lots

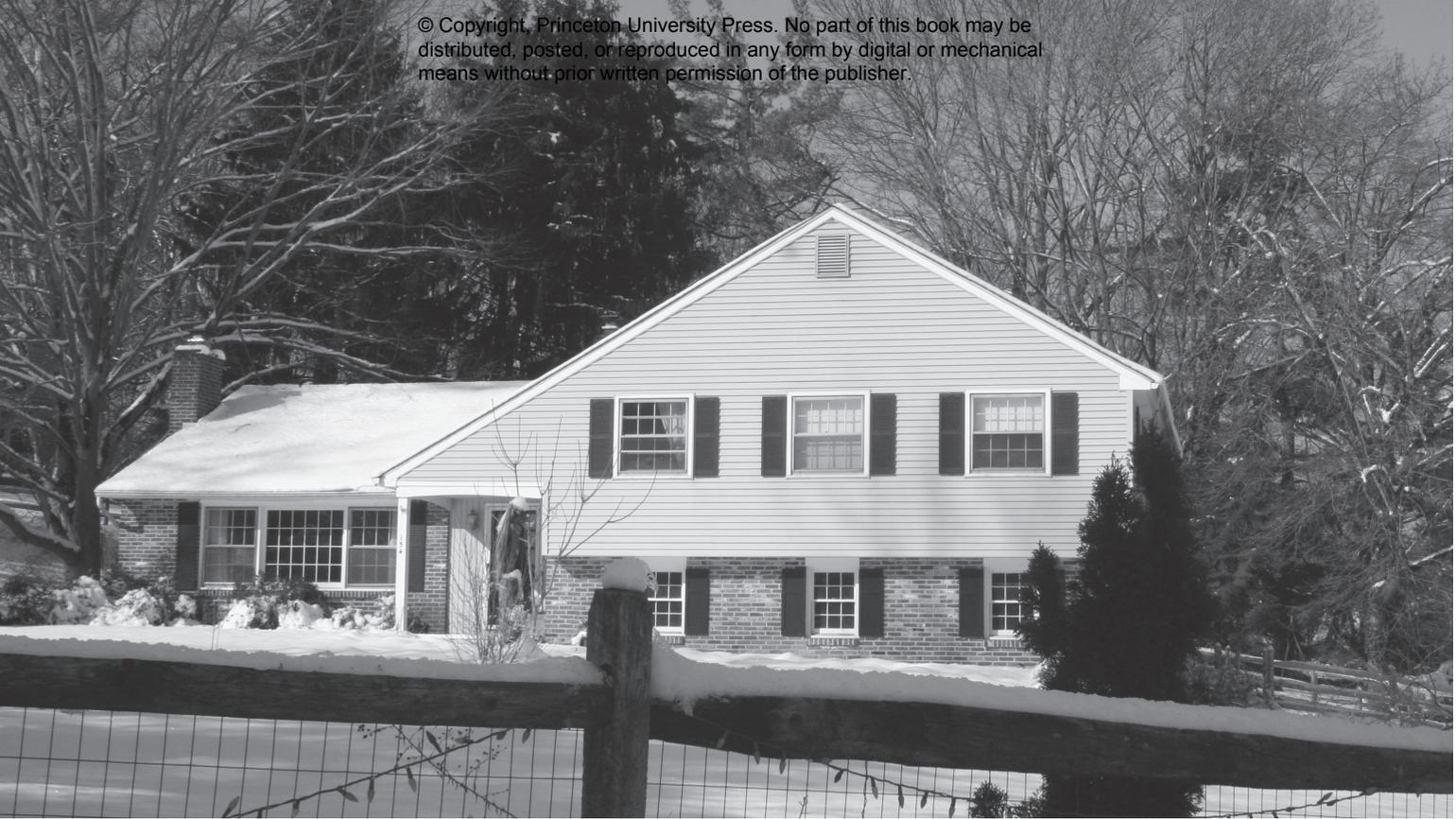


24. Diagram of typical split-level house. Nathanael Roesch.

25. Ralph Bodek, split-level house, Lawrence Park, PA, ca. 1960, exterior, modern view. Photo by the author.

26. Stoltzner Builders, front-to-back split-level, Greenview subdivision, Arlington Heights, IL, modern view. Photo by the author.





27. Devon, PA, larger split-level house, ca. 1960, modern view. Photo by the author.

expanded (fig. 27). They were also usually somewhat more expensive than comparable ranch houses, because of the higher construction costs for the builder.<sup>18</sup> But in some areas during the early fifties, such as parts of New Jersey, lower-cost splits were more available than comparable ranches.<sup>19</sup> Yet, over time, on the national stage, they did not approach the ranch in popularity.

Ranches and splits shared many common features. Coming up the walk from the driveway and entering directly into the living room, one often saw almost immediately a large mirror, either built-in, on the coat closets, or hung by the buyers on the main wall facing the front windows (fig. 28). (Further mirrors would appear on the doors of the bedroom closets and in the bathroom, as in figure 12 above. The builders provided these mirrors.) To the rear of the living room was either an open L containing a dining area, or just the kitchen itself. There might be an opening in the wall from the dinette or the living room to the kitchen (a “pass-through” that could also be closed in some cases); there might be additional folding doors to close off kitchen odors; or the kitchen might be quite open to other rooms. Off to the side (in the ranch) or up the stairs (in the split-level) were the two or three small bedrooms, with high windows for privacy. In the split-level, there was sometimes a “den” or small “recreation room” at the bottom of the stairs, together with heating equipment. In the ranch, an

additional den or small “family room” appeared in the mid-fifties; increasingly it was added on to the kitchen.<sup>20</sup> Most houses contained a fireplace, in the living room, or—later—in the “family room.”

Also inside the “typical” house, there were further surprises for anyone accustomed to interiors from earlier decades. In addition to the mirrors mentioned above, it is notable that the walls were painted rather than wallpapered: usually white or a pale color (fig. 28).<sup>21</sup> Ceilings were relatively low. There were no chandeliers: ceiling fixtures were flush to the ceiling or built into it. Large windows in the living room were framed with floor-to-ceiling draperies (present earlier in houses for the well-to-do but now, in the fifties, almost universal in new houses). Furniture might be in some sort of neocolonial mode, but much more often it was spare and light-looking, in a style that came to be known as “Danish modern” (fig. 10). The bedrooms were smaller than in earlier suburban houses: twelve by fourteen feet for the parents, eight by eleven or ten by thirteen for the children (fig. 8). A queen-size bed fit in the master bedroom, but the children’s rooms were outfitted with bunk beds (fig. 29). Unlike the smaller houses of the twenties, closets were large and generous: deep enough for standard size hangers, they often contained built-in shelving as well (fig. 30).

The bathroom was shiny with high-gloss surfaces and mirrors, and the kitchen a showpiece of modern equipment (figs. 11, 12, 31). In these utilitarian

28. Campanelli Brothers, ranch house, 1954, interior view of living room at Christmas, 1956. Mr. LT.

29. Children’s bunk beds, ca. 1948. Koues, *Encyclopedia of Decorating*, 1948.





30. Model house, Lakewood, CA, ca. 1950, interior of bedroom with closet. City of Lakewood.



31. Kitchen interior, Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, house 4 (architects Landefeld & Hatch), World's Fair 1939–40, Flushing Meadows, NY, Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress.

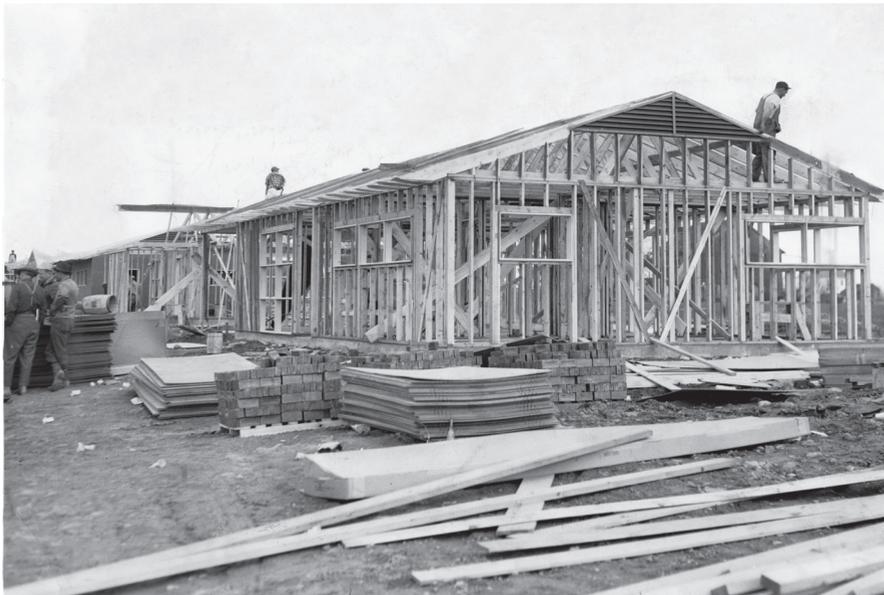
spaces, builders added new amenities with each passing year. By 1960, one might find an “electric built-in wall oven, counter-top range, dishwasher, wall-hung refrigerator, waste disposer, automatic washer,”<sup>22</sup> in addition to a double sink and wall-mounted cabinets. And there might be a riot of color in the kitchen: appliances in turquoise, pink, or yellow. (Some builders employed “color psychologists” to advise them as to the most cheerful combination of colors.)<sup>23</sup> A good-size window was usually placed above the sink.

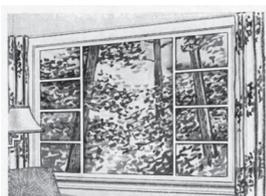
The element of choice for new buyers was always stressed in advertisements and sales brochures; Campanelli Brothers in Natick, Massachusetts,

offered sample books of carpet, wall coverings, styles of appliances, and fabrics for upholstery and draperies.<sup>24</sup> From the late forties on, it was normal for builders to partner with local furniture houses and kitchen supply wholesalers who would furnish and equip the model houses on display. If buyers wished, they could purchase a completely furnished model house. They could also choose the exterior color for their house, or they could repaint it themselves soon after they moved in. It is important to remember, when we look at the largely black-and-white photographs of these houses, that they were colorful, giving their surrounding communities a lot of variation.

The new houses within the new communities employed new modes of construction. They were not prefabricated, although many people at the time expected them to be, and they were not “mass-produced,” a term that is often used, rather inaccurately, to describe them. In fact, they were built using time-honored American construction techniques: they were “stick-built”—framed with wooden studs—and usually erected a few at a time (fig. 32).<sup>25</sup> But they were built in larger groups than before, using new machines, new techniques, and new materials. Builders used new earth-moving equipment to clear sizeable plots of land at once, and new kinds of excavating machines to lay down a number of concrete foundations at once. Framing was completed for a group of houses, before they were sheathed in plywood or other new materials and finished as a group. Standardized lumber sizes and new tools emancipated builders to a certain extent from lumber suppliers, who had previously often acted as builders themselves.<sup>26</sup> The larger builders set up lumber-cutting operations on site, the

32. View of construction, Levittown, PA, ca. 1952. Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia.





33. Sketch for advertisement of Aladdin picture windows in Aladdin Catalog of 1954. Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University.

smaller builders entered into new arrangements with local lumber suppliers. Other new tools (the Skilsaw, the nail gun, paint sprayers) allowed fast production, and required less skill in execution. New finishing materials (siding of wood substitutes, brick or masonry veneer, sprayed-on stucco-like material, roofing mass-produced in sheets, drywall instead of plaster on the interiors), new kinds of insulation, new kinds of floor covering, all produced new economies and promoted speed of construction. These procedures required numbers of new kinds of laborers, less skilled than construction workers had been in the past and usually nonunion. All these techniques permitted, but did not require, large-scale production. Many builders entered into relatively long-term contracts with appliance manufacturers, kitchen suppliers, furniture businesses, and suppliers of building materials. The revolution in domestic construction was a mixture of some mass production methods, together with relatively small-scale enterprise and on-site innovation.

In all these houses the picture window was ubiquitous. All builders used them, all buyers insisted on them. John Keats's 1956 book *The Crack in the Picture Window* assumed that the picture window could serve as a symbol for the entire enterprise of tract house building.<sup>27</sup> This window was not the great expanse of plate glass that the glass companies always recommended in their postwar advertising. Instead, the earliest postwar picture windows were large, multipaned affairs, often floor-to-ceiling, composed of twelve to eighteen panes separated by the narrow wooden strips called muntins. These windows appeared sometimes at the corner of the facade, but over time they came to be located more toward the center. Slowly, over the course of the 1940s and early 1950s, other forms of central window displaced these complicated-looking affairs with fewer panes, as we see in the typical patterns of "scenic windows" offered by Aladdin Ready Cut Homes in 1954 (fig. 33). Of the three forms offered by Aladdin, it was the tripartite style, with one large, clear pane in the middle and two flanking panes with glass and muntins that was most widespread.

Advertisements published by glass manufacturers in the forties and fifties usually showed the window looking out to a natural landscape, but this was not the view seen by the occupants of tract houses. The obvious function of the picture window in typical housing developments of the period was *seeing out*. What one saw was the other tract houses across the street, the street itself, with passing vehicles, and sidewalks with pedestrians, either passing by or approaching one's own house. And one also saw the children at play (fig. 34) who crowded the streets and sidewalks of these places. Thus, the picture window had some of the function of permitting "eyes on the street," in Jane Jacobs's later phrase about safe urban neighborhoods. It also had some of the function of the front porch, which it partially replaced, a place, as Sue Bridwell Beckham writes, of "liminal space," a space where public and private functions of the household



intersected.<sup>28</sup> Needless to say, the window was not a door, as the Fuller Brush Man and the lady of the house discover in the Leonard Dove *New Yorker* cartoon of 1948 (fig. 35). But it was a place where one could see the approach of the brush salesman, the paper boy, the delivery person, and get up to receive them.

So the picture window was a place for looking out: at children at play, at approaching visitors, at the activities of the neighbors, and at people and vehicles passing by. These functions were well understood by the occupants, and desired by them.<sup>29</sup> But what about looking in? In contemporary advertisements and illustrations, the new floor-to-ceiling draperies, which could shelter the inside from onlookers, are seldom closed. In fact, it was common to leave the draperies open even in the evening, a practice that continues (fig. 36).<sup>30</sup> Part of the function of the picture window was therefore to display what was inside, to the outside.<sup>31</sup>

Picture windows appeared in the houses of all ethnic groups, all religious affiliations, and all income levels; they were as common in upscale Rossmore as in working-class Lawrence Park. Scholarly research on the history of window treatments is scarce, but anthropologists have argued that bourgeois householders in the seventeenth-century Netherlands insisted on uncurtained windows, as showcases for their lifestyle.<sup>32</sup> Some writers about postwar suburbs even go so far as to suggest that there was a Puritan-like urge to conformity in the new postwar settlements; everyone monitored everyone else to ensure that their lifestyles were similar. There is no way to be very sure about this now, since scarcely any sound sociological or anthropological studies were done at the time, but if we think about the kinds of choices new householders could make—in size, color, interior decoration, appliances, and the like—and about the individualistic ways in which they remodeled their houses, the conformity argument seems overdone. Instead, I think the picture window allowed the house, the front yard, the sidewalk, and the street to be perceived as extensions of one another, so that the quasi-public spaces of the house formed a partial continuum with the more

34. View from window showing child on bicycle, Torrance, CA, 1956. Mrs. FC.

35. Leonard Dove, cartoon: brush salesman approaches picture window 1948. *New Yorker* Collection.



36. Stoltzner Builders, Greenview subdivision, front-to-back split-level: looking in at night, modern view. Photo by the author.



37. Torrance, Los Angeles, CA, family in front yard, 1960. Mrs. FC.

public spaces of the surrounding community. Given the strong sense of community identity in these early postwar housing developments, this is the most plausible explanation.

There was also a sense in which picture windows, together with the mirrors inside, were about *seeing*: seeing in *and* seeing out *and* seeing around inside. This was a generation for whom seeing offered new kinds of experience: they not only saw in and out through large glass areas, but also saw the world through movie

screens, television screens, and the large windshields of their large automobiles.<sup>33</sup> And they looked through the lenses of cameras at every opportunity—no family was without its “Brownie” camera or its equivalent, and a great many owned the eight-millimeter home movie camera as well.<sup>34</sup> These photographic records, of the house (and the remodeling of the house), the yard, the neighborhood, the barbecues, the block parties, the trips to vacation sites with neighbors, filled photo albums and video collections everywhere.

By far the most frequent image of the new houses taken by their new owners was a family photograph in front of the house. Such pictures showed the proud family, in front of the new house soon after moving in (usually only one parent with two or three children—the other parent was holding the camera) (fig. 37). These were essentially views of the proprietors, carefully kept in albums for the use of future generations. Sometimes they marked, in the history of the family, the first moment of home ownership. Ownership itself—ownership of property—was on display in the picture made by the picture window.

## Generations of Critics and Scholars

Astonishingly, there are modern studies of only a dozen or so of the new tract-based communities and their houses, and of only a handful of their builders. The classic general work by Kenneth Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier*, remains, after more than twenty-five years, the most widely used and authoritative introduction to the subject. But Jackson does not discuss house types or specific suburbs (except for Levittown, Long Island) at any length. Recently, interest in tract housing has revived somewhat, but scholarship has been delayed and distorted by decades of neglect and dislike.

Tract house development in the postwar period attracted harsh criticism over a long period of time: from social commentators and critics, and from many historians. These dwellings have had such a bad reputation among both popular writers and scholars for so long (ever since John Keats’s *The Crack in the Picture Window* of 1956 and Richard and Katherine Gordon’s *The Split-Level Trap* of 1961) that few writers have taken a careful and objective look at them. Beginning in the 1950s, social critics described American tract developments as the homes of white middle-class status-seekers (the “organization man” in the “gray flannel suit”), oppressed and neurotic women, adulterous marriages, delinquent children, declining community bonds, and uniformly bad taste: “little boxes . . . made of ticky-tacky,” in Malvina Reynolds’s famous song.<sup>35</sup> The builders of tract house developments were rapacious entrepreneurs, in the business of wringing the last penny out of substandard construction, so the argument went. The inhabitants, it was said, moved on to better housing as fast as they possibly

could. The tract developments lacked any sense of community, and bled into one another in a visually and socially indistinguishable mass: in a new and repellent mass society. These condemnations were truly extraordinary in their number and extent.<sup>36</sup>

These generalizations were largely false. Socially, the tracts varied a great deal according to the income level of the new inhabitants, but they did not conform to the stereotypes of social science or popular critiques. The majority were occupied originally by people of relatively low incomes, not by upwardly mobile, status-seeking “organization men.” Women were not isolated within them, consigned by lack of transportation and lack of work to being dependent “home-makers”: indeed they usually worked, and, when spouses carpooled or used the train, the wives had the use of the family car. Builders sometimes amassed great new fortunes during the building boom, but most of them were conscientious about quality, and had, in fact, rather high ideals about their work. Neighborhood consciousness was high and constructive. The first inhabitants tended to be young couples with young children, but (among those I interviewed) they also tended to stay; not seldom, their children and grandchildren now live in these developments. All but the smallest tracts contained some provision for schools, parks, and shopping. And even the smallest developed a sense of identity and neighborhood cohesion.<sup>37</sup>

More recently, a number of persuasive historians of urbanization have built on these social critiques to make ecological judgments, deploring the impact of suburban expansion on the environment, and on the character of American urbanism overall. The proliferation of single-family houses in the American landscape has led, it is argued, to wasteful use of land and resources.<sup>38</sup> While such condemnations of “sprawl” raise important points, they ignore the obvious fact that Americans have always preferred to live in single-family houses. With very few exceptions, American urban growth has been driven by the proliferation of stand-alone dwellings. The notion that the first generation of builders after the war should have imagined a different solution to the postwar housing crisis and to the construction of mass housing, or that the American government would have supported it, ignores the realities of centuries of American urbanism. Yet such arguments, like those of the earlier social critics, have distracted us from looking at postwar tract housing in its own terms.

During the past fifteen to twenty years, critics of tract housing have focused on issues of discrimination and segregation. As many have rightly said, the new communities were inaccessible to “people of color” during the 1950s. This was of course at least partly a result of the mandates involved in FHA financing, buttressed by traditional social mores, and it began to change in the 1960s. Another obvious aspect of social life is overlooked by these writers: the new inhabitants were *new*: they came from all over the country, from different places

and backgrounds—often they were second-generation immigrants whose families had been segregated within urban settings. So there was a very significant melting-pot experience in the new postwar communities. Italians, Jews, Catholics, Irish, Polish, and others who had been segregated in American cities and excluded from earlier American suburbs now mingled together freely, forming new kinds of communities that they valued intensely. I think that this experience may have helped Americans to become more accepting of diversity, even where color lines were initially maintained. In fact, suburbs became integrated more quickly than cities: by the 1970s, barriers were broken down nearly everywhere. As historian Becky Nicolaides recently described Lakewood, California, “within twenty years, history flipped. Like many sitcom suburbs, lily-white Lakewood became a town of whites, Latinos, Asians, and blacks. Sitcom suburbia . . . had become the staging ground of neighborhood diversity.”<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, for many of the same reasons that social critics found suburbs undesirable, architectural historians ignored the development of tract housing: to them these houses did not seem to be “architecture.” Traditionally, architectural historians have preferred to deal with the creative work of a well-known and influential individual architect, and with the single architectural work or monument. The lack of identifiable architects and of observable major monuments has made the tract developments uninteresting to most architectural historians, as has the “low-brow” taste supposedly represented in such buildings. Very recently, though, postwar tract houses have begun to appear in general studies of modern American house design like those of Sandy Isenstadt and John Archer.<sup>40</sup> But Isenstadt and Archer do not examine any specific housing developments in detail. The same is true of Witold Rybczynski’s popular books on American ideas of home and on the practices of American developers.<sup>41</sup>

Builders too have begun to fare a little better recently. Elaborating on some of Kenneth Jackson’s remarks, a few writers have attempted to discuss the business methods of the larger builders: Fritz Burns, the Levitts, Frank Sharp in Houston, David Bohannon in the San Francisco Bay area, are always included, while some also mention the work of Joseph Eichler in Northern California.<sup>42</sup> Greg Hise, Dana Cuff, and James Keane have examined the extraordinary housing production of Fritz Burns in Los Angeles. Hise and Cuff have carried this work further, to discuss tract housing as an integral aspect of urbanization in the modern period. In general, writing about the history of tract house development in California has been more comprehensive and sophisticated than building histories dealing with other parts of the country.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, with the exception of the Levitts, none of these builders was especially large for his era: thousands of other builders constructed developments on a similar scale (one to three thousand homes each). In terms of size, even the Levitts and Weingart, Taper and Boyar at Lakewood, were dwarfed by such building giants of



38. Levittown, PA, aerial view of street layout ca. 1953. Mercer Museum Library, Bucks County Historical Society.

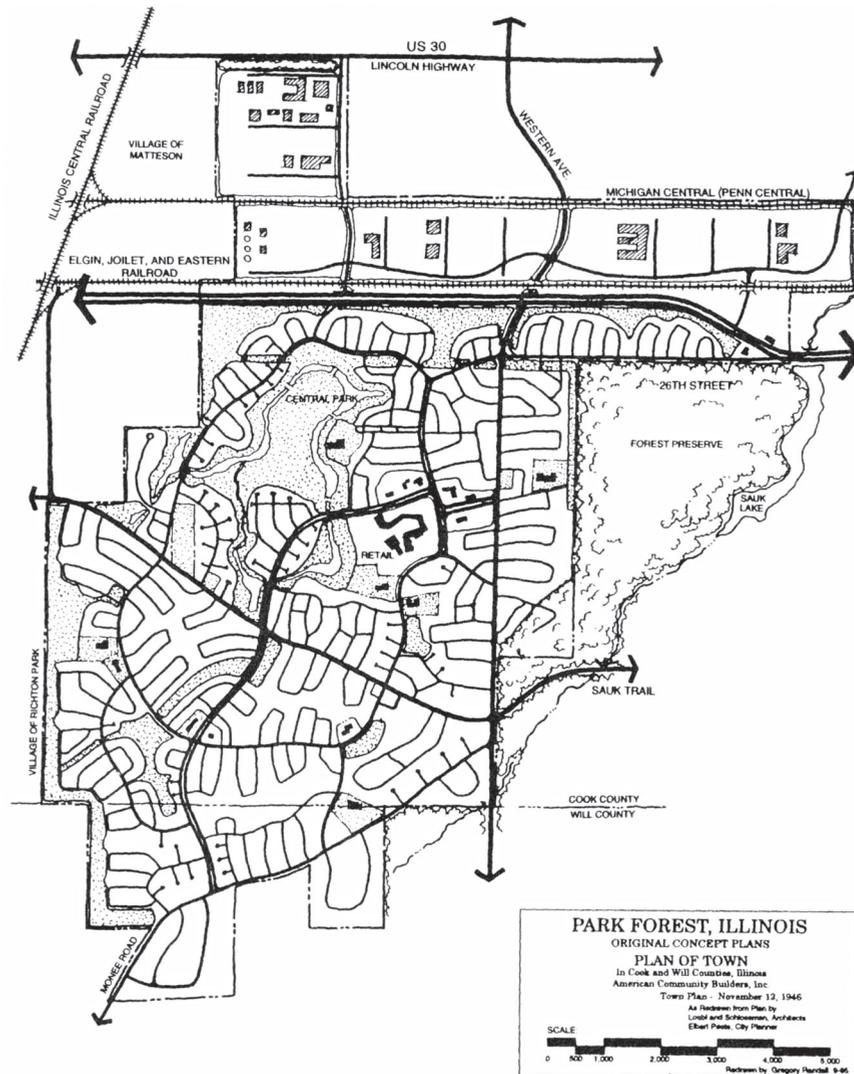
the later fifties as Centex Corporation and Kaufman and Broad.<sup>44</sup> A few writers have begun to provide more information about the Levittowns and about Lakewood. The Levittowns of New York and Pennsylvania, developed and designed by the Levitt family (Abraham and his sons William and Alfred) from 1946 onward, have long been the best known of postwar developments. The Levitts, experienced builders before the war, emerged from wartime with new ambitions to build mass housing. Their first effort, “Island Trees” in Hempstead, Long Island, grew rather haphazardly over a period of five years to number 17,500 dwelling units by 1951. The enormous demand startled the builders; when they acquired new large tracts near the Fairless steel works of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1951, they created a sophisticated overall plan for the new community (fig. 38). Over a period of seven years, the Levitts built 17,311 houses in Levittown, Pennsylvania.

With the work of Barbara Kelly, Dianne Harris, and Richard Longstreth, we are finally beginning to understand the history of these Levittowns.<sup>45</sup>

Lakewood was almost as well known on the West Coast as the Levittowns were in the East. Begun in 1949 on 2,300 acres (with another 3,375 acres added in 1950) just to the southeast of the Los Angeles city limits, Lakewood was developed by a corporation headed by businessmen: builder Louis Boyar (Aetna Construction), banker Ben Weingart, and builder and insurance executive S. Mark Taper (Biltmore Homes), working with planner J. R. Newville of the Engineering Service Corporation. The huge overall plan was laid out on a grid (as was most of Los Angeles and Orange County), and was sometimes photographed by contemporaries as an example of how *not* to plan (fig. 39). Construction proceeded with extraordinary rapidity: 17,500 houses were constructed within the first three years, and by 1957 the population exceeded 70,000, “twice the size of Levittown, NY.”<sup>46</sup> Whether or not the Newville plan was intended to embrace an

39. “Finished Housing,”  
Lakewood, CA, aerial view  
by William A. Garnett, 1950.





40. Park Forest, IL, Elbert Peets Plan, 1946. From Randall, *America's Original GI Town*.

entire new community is unclear today, but the place grew so fast that Lakewood was able to incorporate as a city in 1954.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in the years after incorporation, Lakewood city governments themselves decided the choice and location of public facilities. Don Waldie's books about Lakewood, part personal experiences and insights, part poetry, and full of important historical information, have provided an intimate window on the history of the largest of all postwar housing developments.<sup>48</sup>

The third of the best-known early new communities, Park Forest, Illinois, in its time came to be the subject of much discussion among social scientists.<sup>49</sup>

Now, it is less familiar to the general reader, although it has been well studied by Gregory Randall.<sup>50</sup> Located to the south of Chicago, just to the east of Interstate 57, Park Forest was developed by a group that called themselves American Community Builders, headed by Philip M. Klutznick, a former Federal Public Housing Authority commissioner who was also active in writing FHA publications on recommended forms for neighborhoods. Together with Carroll Fuller Sweet, a retired banker, and Nathan Manilow, builder and investor, the group hired Elbert Peets, well-known planner and author and garden city proponent, to prepare an overall plan (fig. 40). The new houses were intended initially as rental units for veterans and their families, but soon single-family dwellings were added for sale. Plagued by transportation difficulties and slow sales, the whole developed rather slowly until 1962, when it contained 8,500 dwelling units (housing about 28,000 people). Its eventual social composition was more upscale than that of Lakewood or Levittown, Pennsylvania: its “average adult male” inhabitant in 1950 had more than four years of college, and many household heads were professional people.<sup>51</sup> But in the 1950s, Chicago newspapers often spoke of Park Forest as a model for new planning.

## Research and Methods

In adding to the work on the Levittowns, Lakewood, and Park Forest by looking at twelve other important developments, and by looking at design issues as well as society, I hope to get beyond the highly prejudiced critiques of the early years, and beyond the few special studies, in order to take a closer look at typical tract houses, their immediate environments, their formal character, and their attractions to their inhabitants. Were there commonalities among the tract houses of different places? Why were they built, and who designed them and their physical environments? Why did people like them, and why did people stay in their new communities? How do tract houses compare to other American dwelling types of earlier periods? How did the settlements themselves vary in planning, in relation to the size of the tract? How did they compare with other efforts at mass housing, in the United States and elsewhere? Who were the principal creators of the new designs? Did their design inspiration derive in any way from “high” architecture, or may the reverse have been true? My perspectives are those of the architectural and urban historian, but the questions I ask go beyond the questions usually asked within those specialties. This book can only be a beginning, however; many additional studies and reexaminations are needed, both specific and general.

The vast majority of housing developments in the first postwar years were quite different from the giant Lakewood or Levittowns, and from the well-planned

Park Forest; they were on smaller tracts, and contained smaller numbers of houses. There were thousands of these developments, a daunting number. My preliminary surveys show that they varied a great deal among themselves. Some were explicitly marketed to the well-to-do, though the majority were intended for low-income buyers, especially veterans. Some were quite large (four thousand houses or more), many were medium-size (twelve hundred to three thousand), and a great many were quite small (four to six hundred). The builders varied too: some of the builders, like Burns and the Levitts, had begun to construct and market single-family houses well before the war, but most plunged into the development business after the war without much education or training. The engineers who helped the builders lay out their developments ranged from the licensed “land surveyors” who invariably signed off on subdivision proposals to highly trained and broadly educated specialists. Houses varied somewhat in style, materials, and construction methods. In an effort to show variation as well as commonalities, I have selected a few developments to consider in detail, in full knowledge of the difficulties of sampling among a large number of places and types.

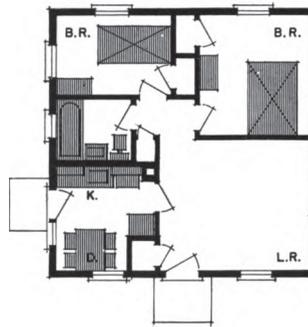
My focus on Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston unfortunately excludes examples of the new suburbs of the South and the Northwest: I avoided these because of constraints on my time and energy. I have also avoided most of the new communities of the Southwest, for similar reasons. But, by including Elk Grove Village in Chicago, built by the Dallas firm Centex, I have been able to take a brief look at postwar urban development in Texas. I also exclude the New York metropolitan area. New York City’s suburban history is enormously complex, since it took place on a huge scale in three very different areas: New Jersey, Long Island, and lower New York State. A fair sampling of builders and communities from all three areas would overbalance the other builders and communities discussed here. And I question whether the suburbanization of New York City, the core of the East Coast “megapolis,” was very typical of the nation as a whole. In any case, other earlier writers have tended to focus on New York’s suburbanization, in lower New York State, Long Island, and New Jersey: this means that we need now to look more carefully at other geographical areas.

Within each of the metropolitan districts dealt with here, I explored the areas outside the older cities by car and using maps, in order to locate sizeable (six hundred to about six thousand dwellings) developments begun between 1947 and 1959. Further exploration, together with newspaper searches, narrowed my examples to nine builders: three in or near Los Angeles, three near Chicago, two in the Philadelphia area, and one who worked near both Boston and Chicago. I selected these builders to demonstrate variations in sizes of their enterprises, and variations in backgrounds and methods. Of the builders, three were small firms constructing houses on small subdivisions (Vandruff near Los Angeles,

Stoltznern outside Chicago, Facciolo in the Philadelphia area); the others built up tracts that contained between one and seven thousand dwellings. Of these larger builders, three remained local (Bodek in Philadelphia, Cortese in the Los Angeles area, Hill in Chicago), their reputations tied to the construction of a single tract. Two others (Campanelli Brothers, based in the Boston area, and Centex, coming from Dallas to build in Chicago) expanded their businesses beyond their local base, attempting to become national in scope. Of these last two, Centex succeeded in its national aspirations, growing into a giant of postwar housing construction; Campanelli Brothers, in contrast, eventually withdrew from the housing business and became a successful firm of commercial builders based in Braintree, Massachusetts. Fritz Burns of Los Angeles is represented here primarily through the design and construction of Panorama City, but he was a longtime builder, locally well-known for his earlier, large Los Angeles tracts; his business remained based in Los Angeles, but he built elsewhere in the West, and he exerted great influence nationally in the postwar period through his leadership in the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). These examples allow me to discuss varied building types and different models of the building enterprise, and to look at the impact of size on the character of planning the subdivision. I also find that regional variations were important, at least at the start of the process: local traditions played a part in house design, while local landholding patterns and land regulations greatly influenced the size and conceptualization of subdivisions.

The builders I focus on were one-man or (in two cases) one-family enterprises; their procedures depended upon the highly idiosyncratic personalities of their owners.<sup>52</sup> In most of these cases, I was able to locate subdivision records, and to interview the original builders or their children. In many instances I was also able to interview local planning officials. Often, growing community organizations have collected sales brochures and other pertinent documents. Indeed, community organizations in many of these places have become very active in the past ten years, establishing libraries, setting up house museums, collecting interviews from the builders and buyers, and in a few cases gaining “historic district” classification for their communities. I have supplemented this information through intensive study of the real estate articles and advertisements in the major metropolitan newspapers. Other important resources for me have been the publications of kit builders (Sears and Aladdin) and pattern-book publishers such as Garlinghouse Company.<sup>53</sup> These sources often inspired the builders discussed here. This selection of builders and developments should permit some generalizations about what was typical in the period.

To set these specific tracts in their context, it has also been necessary to look at VA and FHA guidelines for builders and lenders, which were national in scope. While it is not at all certain that most builders consistently read national



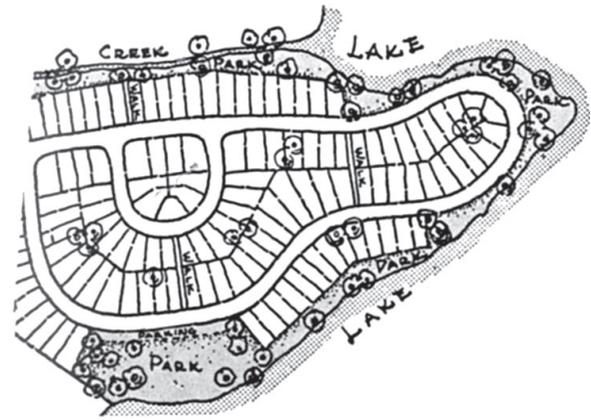
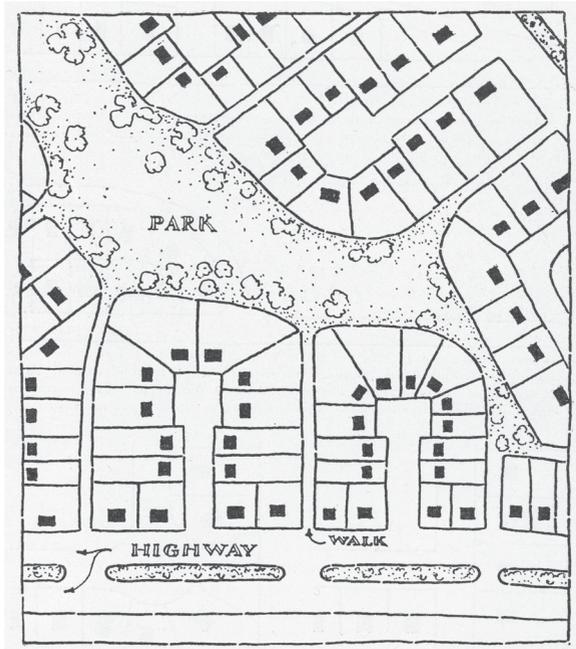
L. R. LIVING ROOM K. KITCHEN  
B. R. BEDROOM D. DINING

41. FHA, Minimum House, 900 square feet, 1940, exterior. Federal Housing Administration, *Principles of Planning Small Houses*, July 1, 1940.

42. FHA, Minimum House, 900 square feet, 1940, plan. Federal Housing Administration, *Principles of Planning Small Houses*, July 1, 1940.

architectural magazines, they all paid attention to national lending guidelines. The FHA published guides to every aspect of building and development. In 1936 and 1940, the FHA's central office described standards for the building of a "minimum house" that would be about 650 to 900 square feet in plan. The earlier house included two bedrooms, a dining area, a kitchen, and a bathroom. By 1940, the living room had become dominant, and the dining area had been absorbed into the kitchen (figs. 41, 42). In plan and exterior appearance, this house provided the model for much of America's wartime housing. Many of the first postwar tract houses (such as the Levitt Cape and "ranch") mimicked this plan. By 1941, and continuing thereafter, FHA publications also urged builders to make their designs responsive to "function," echoing, perhaps, the discussions of small dwelling types that had been taking place during the previous fifteen years in Europe.<sup>54</sup> Other FHA publications offered guidelines for neighborhood design, contract specifications, construction methods, siting, and land planning. Often, the district organizations of the FHA added further specifications and advice to these sets of guidelines. For new and inexperienced builders, the FHA publications offered a comprehensive education in "how to do it."

Apart from its prescriptions about house planning, the most important FHA regulations were those relating to neighborhood design.<sup>55</sup> Beginning in 1936 with the pamphlet *Planning Neighborhoods for Small Houses*, reissued in an expanded version with revisions in 1941, and with supplementary provisions for specific states from 1946 to 1965, the FHA attempted to assert rules for the planning of new communities. These rules were derived from the teachings of Clarence Perry about neighborhoods, from nineteenth-century ideas about neighborhood revitalization, and from such traditions of garden city ideas as existed in this country.<sup>56</sup> American garden city planning ideas—from Forest Hills Garden to New Deal "Greenbelt" settlements, to Radburn, Reston, and Columbia—neglected the idea that workplaces should be embedded in new communities, an idea that the European Garden City movement held dear. FHA neighborhood planning guidelines repeatedly referred to Radburn, New Jersey, as a model (fig. 43). New



neighborhoods, the FHA urged, must be focused around parks, schools, and other community facilities; their streets should be curvilinear and organized for walking; the whole should be protected from through traffic by buffering roads around the perimeter (fig. 44). Furthermore, neighborhoods (or subdivisions—the distinction was not made clear) must be part of overall community planning, with a master plan to be carried out by local zoning officials.<sup>57</sup>

In the case of house design, the FHA or its local branches exercised significant control through the approval of mortgages, but its planning ideas had a less direct influence. Although the guidelines stated that “approved” neighborhoods would be favored in the granting of mortgages, few mechanisms for such approval existed. An indirect influence is very clear: FHA neighborhood planning ideas were held up as desirable by the NAHB (see the section on Fritz Burns in chapter 2), which offered prizes for neighborhood development; prize-winners were newsworthy, which was sometimes useful to the locality. But the implementation of FHA regulations was left to local zoning or planning boards, which often ignored them, and to individual builders, who often resisted providing open space or community facilities. Frequently, but not invariably, local zoning boards and planning officials required some provision for park spaces or spaces for schools as part of a subdivision plan. Many individual builders and their engineers turned to curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs, however; perhaps this preference was derived from the FHA publications. And in a few instances,

43. Radburn, NJ, plan.  
Federal Housing  
Administration, *Planning  
Neighborhoods for Small  
Houses*, July 1, 1936.

44. Street design: “preserve  
natural features.” Federal  
Housing Administration,  
*Successful Subdivisions*, 1941.

at least among my case studies, builders and engineers produced well-conceived overall master plans at the start of the building process (Panorama City, Lawrence Park, Elk Grove Village). In many other cases, builders were able to affect the ideas and regulations of local planning officials.

As part of a study of context—of the sources of builders’ and buyers’ ideas about their houses—I have made a systematic study of the main architectural and builders’ magazines, and of the “home” magazines and books that proliferated in the postwar period. In the first ten years after the war, houses and housing were big news for Americans: new magazines had feature articles on the builders and their houses; huge numbers of books were devoted to “how to build a house” or “how to buy a house”; glossy magazines like *House and Garden* and *Better Homes and Gardens* promoted particular kinds of house design and interior design, and older professional journals for architects greatly expanded their readership with frequent articles on house design and construction. These magazines, and other popular periodicals like *McCall’s Magazine*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, and *Parents Magazine* published frequent questionnaires gathered from new buyers.<sup>58</sup> Research institutes such as the Illinois Small Homes Council tirelessly collected information about specific building techniques, and about buyers’ home preferences. Cornell University’s College of Home Economics (within the School of Agriculture) spent several years studying kitchen design, and published their findings frequently.<sup>59</sup> Producers of home appliances and construction materials published their own studies of the housing boom. So did insurance firms and realtors’ associations. The federal government created new boards and agencies, which studied the housing phenomenon: the Building Research Advisory Board, and the National Research Council, for example, or the Housing and Home Finance Agency. And so did educational institutions and a variety of nonprofit organizations. According to a report by the Building Research Advisory Board in 1952, 861 educational institutions, foundations, commercial laboratories, trade associations, and professional societies were publishing reports on their housing research. And when one of these magazines, organizations, institutions, or government offices issued a report, major newspapers across the country published a condensed version.

During the same years as these reports and publications, American museums were also focusing on some aspects of house design. Beginning with the famous exhibition on “The International Style” in 1931, the Museum of Modern Art in New York emphasized the role of house design in “modern architecture”: for the most part, the abstract and austere house designs of émigré architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe,<sup>60</sup> greatly admired by long-term curator Philip Johnson, set the standard of taste in house design for MoMA’s exhibition policies. But other styles and issues gained a hearing. The museum also exhibited the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and built exhibition houses displaying a

range of styles: one by West Coast architect Gregory Ain and one by Gropius associated and former Bauhaus teacher Marcel Breuer.<sup>61</sup> Under the brief curatorship of Elizabeth Mock, disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright, MoMA architectural policy took a more practical turn, exemplified in Mock's publications *If You Want to Build a House* and *Tomorrow's Small House*. Nevertheless, the MoMA shows and publications never confronted issues of cost, nor did they ever make clear the large role that mass housing had played in Europe in the development of the modern movement. It is highly unlikely that MoMA's appeal ever reached very far beyond the architectural elites of the nation, and the students of Mies and Gropius at IIT and Harvard.<sup>62</sup>

If one looks for influential imagery that might have inspired the ideas of builders and buyers, a better choice might be American World's Fairs and other exhibitions featuring a "House of the Future" or a "House of Tomorrow." These notions had a long and very far-reaching popular history.<sup>63</sup> Beginning at least as early as the 1920s, the theme of a "house of the future" or "house of tomorrow" appeared frequently in exhibitions and newspaper articles. The electrical industries displayed electrified model houses from early in the century.<sup>64</sup> Henry Ford predicted a prefabricated "all electric house" in 1929, while in 1931 the Architectural and Allied Arts Exposition in New York City exhibited a factory-made house of aluminum, glass and rubber. Also in 1931, newspapers reported the views of realtors that the "house of the future" would be mass-produced, "made for use and pleasure" and not to satisfy "the whims of architects." In 1932, a "small house forum" held by the American Institute of Steel Construction predicted the mass production of a "nomadic house," full of new appliances and transportable by truck and rail.<sup>65</sup> Occasionally, exhibitions and newspaper accounts described housing achieved by International Style architects in Europe as houses "of the future," but for the most part, their emphasis was devoted to American technology and its prospects for dwelling design.<sup>66</sup> American World's Fairs of the thirties and early forties featured some version of "the house of tomorrow": visited by huge audiences, these exhibition houses also came to be well-known to newspaper and magazine readers, though they were not universally admired. The "House of Tomorrow" at Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition of 1933, for example, a circular, all-glass structure, was dismissed as "freaky" by the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>67</sup> "Tomorrow Town" at the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, widely visited and reported and generally well liked, exhibited fifteen different houses, sponsored by an equal number of manufacturers, interest groups, and by the FHA. Prospectuses promised that there would be "no extreme or modernistic design" in Tomorrow Town.<sup>68</sup> A wood house (National Lumber Manufacturers Association), a plywood house (Douglas Fir Plywood Association), an all-electric house (General Electric Company), and a house of glass (Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company) received the most attention: the first three were greatly admired. The Pittsburgh



45. Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, house 4 (architects Landefeld & Hatch), World's Fair 1939-40, Flushing Meadows, NY, exterior. Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress.

46. Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, house 4 (architects Landefeld & Hatch), World's Fair 1939-40, Flushing Meadows, NY, interior. Gottscho-Schleisner Collection, Library of Congress.



Plate Glass house, despite promises in the fair's prospectus that there would be "no extreme or modernistic design" in Tomorrow Town, closely resembled contemporary International Style houses (figs. 45, 46). The commentator in the *New York Times* described it as "the fish-bowl home," but it may have prefigured, or influenced, the use of large glass areas in the houses of the fifties and sixties. A model kitchen also looked ahead to some of the kitchens of the fifties and sixties (fig. 31). Other model houses featured new materials: plywood siding, asbestos siding, asphalt shingles, materials that would become familiar in the tract houses of the postwar period. A "motor home" had its main entrance through the garage.<sup>69</sup> Thus, even before the beginning of war in 1941, a "future house" built of modern materials and modern but not "modernistic" in design, with space for at least one automobile, was a theme familiar to virtually all Americans.<sup>70</sup>

During the war, especially in its last years, newspapers, exhibitions, and advertisers took up the theme. The house of tomorrow, writers, manufacturers, and exhibitors agreed, would be "all electric," with electric, "streamlined" kitchen appliances, built-in radios and television sets, automatic household-wide vacuuming systems, air conditioning, kitchens "that cook by radio frequency—radionics." New materials including plastic fabrics and aluminum and fiberboard panels would be used in the construction of small, mass-produced, relatively inexpensive dwellings, heated by radiant heat. There would be plenty of glass (but not too much)—in doors and windows.<sup>71</sup> The theme of "tomorrow's house" had a significant afterlife in the postwar period, even as its promises were being fulfilled in American tract houses. Fritz Burns's "research house" of 1946, designed by Wurdeman and Becket (figs. 47, 48), erected at Highland Avenue and Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles as an exhibition, contained a built-in radio system and a multitude of all-electric appliances (disposal, blender, dishwasher, washer/dryer, home freezer). It also featured the storage wall that Burns had used in many of his houses, and an outdoor patio heated by radiant heat along with an outdoor barbecue. It was visited by thousands, and published in national magazines.<sup>72</sup> Usually, though, the phrase was used to suggest something extremely modern, perhaps not yet buildable. Monsanto's "House of the Future" at Disneyland in 1957, for example, was built of intersecting plastic pods: this was titillating but not an inspiration to builders or buyers. Yet the idea of a house of the future persisted: when Kimball Hill opened his Housing Research Laboratory in Rolling Meadows outside Chicago in 1958 (see below, chapter 4), one of the houses was billed as an "extremely modern 'House of Tomorrow.'"<sup>73</sup>

Closely related to the World's Fairs, with their emphasis on building technology, were the home shows of the postwar period. These were exposition-like shows, frequently sponsored by local Home Builders' Associations in conjunction with various manufacturers. Here one could see the newest techniques and materials: wall coverings, stud construction, and insulation were displayed,



47. Fritz Burns with architects Wurdeman and Becket, Research House, Los Angeles, 1946, exterior. Maynard Parker photographer.

48. Fritz Burns with architects Wurdeman and Becket, Research House, Los Angeles, 1946, patio. Huntington Library, Maynard Parker photographer.



together with kitchen and bathroom appliances, and new kinds of tools for do-it-yourselfers. Sometimes, too, a copy of the newest house by a local builder would be featured, as was the case with both Burns and Vandruff in Los Angeles (see chapter 2). These shows go back at least to the 1930s, but became much more numerous after the war. Both builders and buyers visited them eagerly. As did “fixer-uppers.”<sup>74</sup>

Some writers see the idea of “the house of the future” or “the miracle house” as propagated by big business (and especially by manufacturers of household

appliances and equipment), and as antithetical to the interests of small builders.<sup>75</sup> But, as we will see in the successive chapters on individual builders, merchant builders prided themselves on the household equipment they provided and formed close connections with appliance manufacturers, who helped them pay for their advertising.<sup>76</sup> If postwar builders did not adopt some form of “high-style modernism,” it was because they saw that buyers shared the views of newspaper commentators on the World’s Fair houses—their amenities were welcome, but many of their forms seemed foolish or alien. The great majority of Americans saw the split-level or the ranch as the true “modern” house.

Making use of this flood of published information and exhibited imagery is a complicated process. The reports published by research organizations offer various kinds of “hard” information: numbers of houses in certain locations; the expressed preferences of certain builders and buyers. Beyond that, however, these materials need to be treated by scholars with careful discrimination as to who read what, when, and why. Very few of the builders I have focused on read professional magazines for architects, though they would sometimes pick up a special issue on builders. Nor did they pay much attention to the glossy home magazines. Experienced builders, and most new ones as well, read the magazines that were most oriented toward construction issues—magazines such as *American Builder and Building Age*, *Construction Methods and Equipment*, *American Builder*, or *Practical Builder*; they also turned to pattern books, as builders so often had in the past. Both experienced builders and new builders paid very careful attention to the handbooks and guidelines of the FHA and the Veterans’ Administration. As for professional architectural periodicals, too often historians, especially architectural historians, have substituted the study of houses published by *Architectural Forum* or *Architectural Record* for a study of what was actually built, leading to some extreme distortions. What was published and what was built were often quite different. When starting to build, builders liked to do their own research into what buyers wanted. Buyers certainly did not read the professional architectural magazines, and almost certainly they avoided the expensive popular magazines.<sup>77</sup> Buyers had available to them a vast array of books and articles on the theme of “planning to build” or “how to buy,” but the buyers I was able to interview do not remember reading anything like this. When these young families found that they badly needed a house, they looked in the newspapers, visited the houses advertised, and bought their houses: their selections, in other words, were rather simple and straightforward. And overarching all these issues is one of *timing*: most of the fundamental changes in house and community design after World War II took place within a very brief period, between 1945 and about 1952. After the latter date, it rarely makes sense to speak, for example, of the possible influence of a publication, museum show, movie, or television program upon a particular major design feature.<sup>78</sup>

A thorough study of newspapers, including articles on development and advertisements for new houses, can reveal a great deal about what was actually built, and considerable information about the buyers.<sup>79</sup> Contemporary newspaper reporters often interviewed the inhabitants of the new communities that were springing up around their cities; such articles are extremely useful. The great manufacturers of household equipment—Honeywell, Westinghouse, Hotpoint, Norge, and especially General Electric—featured contemporary builders' houses in their advertising and sometimes partnered with them in promotional schemes, or in discovering land for development. Their role is significant, but again, their advertisements are not always representative.

As for the roles of other media in affecting housing design preferences and choices, I do not think that television had much part in affecting house types or buyers' choices. As I explain in chapter 5, TV programs seem instead to have drawn upon postwar excitement about housing to produce prototypes that were far more elaborate than what was actually being built. Movies had a much broader audience in the first decade after the war, that is, during the years when the first design decisions were being made. But, as with TV, their themes were suggestive of excitement about the new houses, rather than playing any causal role. Nevertheless, given the flood of publications, reports, museum displays, and World's Fair exhibitions, neither builders nor buyers could have remained unaware of the intense public interest in their new houses and settlements.

It is my contention that the people who "made" the tract house developments—who shaped house design and overall layout—were the builders themselves, in concert with the engineers and above all, with the buyers. Builders learned from and competed with each other, visited each other's developments, assessed each other's markets and profits. But, more than anything else, they interacted with the buyers, by testing the market through model homes, hearing buyers' preferences through their salesmen, and sometimes doing their own surveys of buyers' opinions. The buyers, on the other hand, reacted to the houses that they could see and visit and voted with their pocketbooks and moving vans. They found their new houses through word of mouth (family, friends, buddies from the service) or advertisements in the newspapers; or sometimes through a new employer. They were even less likely than the builders to read glossy home design magazines or architects' publications, though of course they read some of the most popular magazines like *Parents Magazine*, *Popular Science*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Readers' Digest*.<sup>80</sup> They were faithful newspaper readers and enthusiastic moviegoers; television was much less important to them in the early years of tract house development. Above all, they were influenced by their life's experiences, by experiences of immigration, depression, and war; by housing traditions that included farmhouses, workers' tenements, bungalows, and war housing. These traditions were important to the builders too. They understood each other well,

the builders and buyers, for they came from similar backgrounds and shared many of the same viewpoints. Thus, I have attempted to convey the life stories of each whenever possible.

My case studies of builders and their developments are organized regionally: Los Angeles and Southern California (chapter 2); the Philadelphia and Boston metropolitan areas (chapter 3); and the Midwest and Southwest, represented by four builders in the “Golden Corridor” area northwest of Chicago (chapter 4). Chapter 4 deals with builders whose work evolved within local Chicago traditions, and also with builders who came to Chicago from outside, from Dallas and Boston. In all these chapters, the emphasis is on the builders as individual entrepreneurs: on who they were, why they built, how they organized their firms, how they acquired land, what house forms and street arrangements they chose and why. Their firms ranged in size from one-man and one-family operations to a large corporate entity dominated by a single individual. Often, their ideas came from their strong local roots, but they also paid a great deal of attention to other builders’ work and to the development of markets nationwide. Thus, over time, we will see their house forms and street layouts become more and more detached from their particular region. The regional organization of my text does some violence to chronology, however. In the chapters on Chicago, for example, I treat a later building firm, the Stoltzners, before an earlier one, Kimball Hill, because the Stoltzners were a smaller firm, and worked closer to the urban core. Ralph Bodek in Philadelphia precedes, in my text, the earlier Campanellis in Boston. I will try wherever possible to make clear the actual time sequence of events in house design while also stressing regional differences.

The three specific case study chapters are followed by two more general chapters. Chapter 5 analyzes the ideas and motives of the buyers of tract houses within this early postwar period. It depends on specific evidence gleaned from interviews with original owners of houses within my case studies; it sets the choices of these buyers within the broader context of the history of modest dwelling types from the 1920s onward. It also emphasizes the impact of World War II on popular ideas and attitudes in the first postwar years. Chapter 6, the conclusion, returns to issues of authorship, and then discusses the successes and failures of tract houses as mass housing.

My account stops about 1965. The tract house developments of the first two decades after World War II form a special chapter in the history of American housing and urban growth. After the 1960s, new developments shrank in size as large parcels of agricultural land became less and less available (and more and more expensive). The tract house, on the other hand, became larger and larger and more complex in plan in response to changes in taste and changes in population. New buyers in tract house developments came to be more affluent and more demanding of certain amenities. Federally subsidized mortgages, so

prevalent in the earlier period, also shrank in number and increased in cost, in response to the decreasing number of veterans (either from World War II or the Korean War). Increasingly, the roles of builder and developer came to be separated, with the developer finding and financing the land and laying out the streets and sewers, while selling off individual parcels to individual builders or, sometimes, to architects. Nonetheless, the innovations of the fifties continued for a long time: the “open-plan,” large, informal, and rather undifferentiated living spaces (including the kitchen), intimacy with the outdoors via large windows or patio doors, small and relatively private bedroom areas, efficient arrangements for built-in storage, a visually dominant garage, a high level of sophisticated household equipment. The lifestyle that evolved in tandem with the new kinds of houses—neighborly, informal, focused on the nuclear family with young children, oriented to the outdoors, committed to property ownership and to the local community—has also endured.