

# Levittown: Documents of an Ideal American Suburb

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**An Early Family Poses in Front of their 1948 Cape Cod**

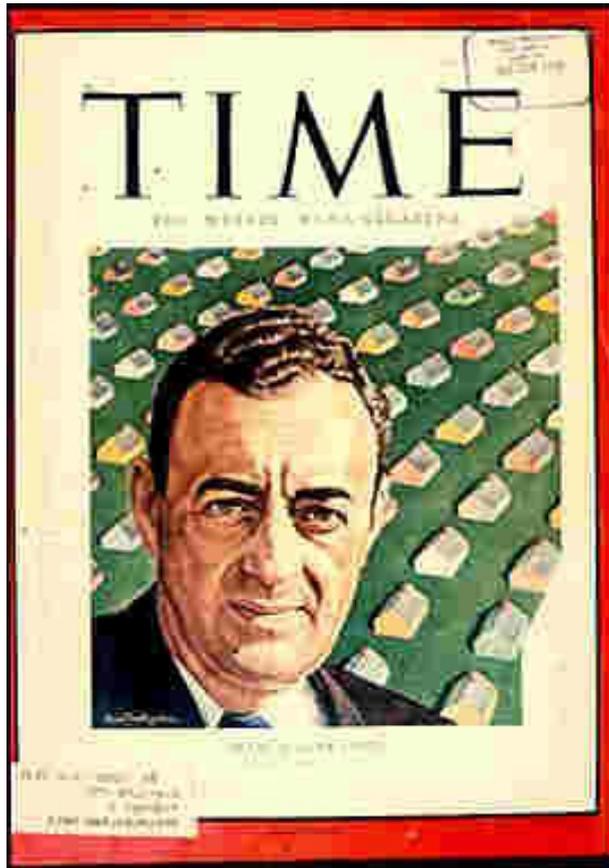


**"An early Luau"-- block party in Levittown, ca. 1951. Photo courtesy Charles Tekula, Jr.**

Levittown has long represented the paradigmatic postwar American suburb. Yet very little in the way of good critical work has been done on the history and significance of this American cultural icon. Over the past decade I have been assembling materials to provide an ongoing cultural history of Levittown and, through its story, to offer a more nuanced and sympathetic picture of American suburban life in the Cold War era. Part of a larger project, *Outside the Gates: Cultural Landscapes from the Material to the Virtual*, my Levittown work has become so interesting in itself that I have allowed it to evolve into something closer to a work of collaborative history, here on the 'net.

# Levittown: An Informal Cultural History

Built by William Levitt using the most novel and up-to-date of building methods, Levittown (originally *Island Trees*) capitalized on the housing crunch of the immediate postwar years, offering affordable housing to returning GIs and their families, in the form of small, detached, single-family houses equidistant from New York City and the burgeoning defense industrial plants on Long Island.



**William Levitt made the cover of *Time* on July 13, 1950**

From the first, Levittown appeared as much a creation of myth as one made of wood and plaster. Levitt was a master publicist, and he understood that to make his community a success, he needed to present it as a new form of ideal American life, one that combined the idealized middle-class life of the prewar suburban communities, with the democratized life of younger, mainly urban-raised GIs and their families.



**Before: An Aerial View of the Potato Fields on Long Island Acquired By Levitt for the First Stages of Levittown**



**After: An Aerial View of the First Stages of Levittown**

To do this, Levitt did more than assemble cookie-cutter homes along curvilinear drives off the parkways leading from New York City. The accusations against Levittown from the first focused on its relentless homogeneity, the cramped quarters of its interiors, and the raw, unfinished quality of its landscape. The critics were judging from an older, more elite standpoint-- they were, themselves, idealizing an American landscape inappropriate to Levitt, to his constituency, or to the moment in which Levittown came to be. There was a suburb devoted to upper-middle-class conservatism; they looked to precedents in the custom-built housing communities built before the war, some of them by Levitt and his family.

Levittowners, however, understood their new houses in the context of the ones they were leaving-- multi-unit brick, stone or frame apartment complexes within the boroughs, buildings that were themselves often laid out ten, twenty, thirty at a time in a relentless self-replication that is still visible along streets in Brooklyn, Queens, and even Manhattan. If you grew up in those apartments, the aesthetic and philosophical objections of Levittown weren't quite so visible.



An early *Time* magazine article marveled at the demand for Levittown houses

And the nature of Levittown as a *community* was a major attraction. Levitt was a smart man; he understood that his subdivision was too big to work as a neighborhood and so he built it as a new form of American community, an extended cluster of neighborhoods with

"village centers" to hold the elements together. In doing this, he was drawing on much of the urban theory architects and builders had read during the long and empty years of the Depression, when architectural journals struggled to remain relevant to their readers and keep up the spirits of unemployed housing professionals. He was also drawing on the experiences of architects and builders drafted into the war to build new housing for the military and for defense industry. His Levittown wasn't so very different from the utopian plan of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, designed during the war by the prestigious architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings, Merrill, a community itself modeled in part after the TVA communities of the Depression-era utopian Roosevelt planners.



**Weekly newsmagazines treated Levittown as the "type" of the new America; the title for this article was "A Revolution in Epitome"**

The raw quality of the landscape, too, didn't seem so awful to new renters and (a little later) owners, who knew that the trees and grass would quickly grow, and who understood the Levitt salesman's pitch promising opportunities to personalize the interior and exterior of your Levittown house. *Life* ran a contest, seeking the best-decorated Levittown house, and the winner was a rather startling red-themed Mandarin-Revival Sino-Asian extravaganza. Over time, Levittown houses changed character, as their occupants rose in status and in economic wealth, and as families expanded and community standards of innovation and growth trickled from the home-improvement seminars at the Community Center and later

the High School, out into the Saturday projects and summer vacation plans of Levittown residents.

Over time, as well, the fabric of a community came into being, assembled and sewn together by individuals who remembered the urban neighborhoods of New York City, or the rural towns of Long Island, New Jersey, and elsewhere, from which they themselves had come. But this was an instant neighborhood without the heritage and residues of generations in the same place. So the institutions, formal and informal, had to be made, then modified with use.

Today's heterogenous Levittown is a testimony to the resilience of the community, and to its larger moment: a time of American optimism, expansiveness, and prosperity. That its history contains the paradoxes and failures of the American Dream, including racial covenants in the early Levitt-controlled years, only serves to remind us of its dependence on the deepest streams of American culture, both noble and ignoble.