

## Student Handout 5-Levittown

Secondary Source: LEVITTOWN

In 1951, Levitt and Sons promoted their new development outside Philadelphia as “the most perfectly planned community in America.” Shortly afterwards, America’s planning guru, Lewis Mumford quipped that “Mechanically it is admirably done. Socially the design is backward.” The second of three “Levittowns,” Pennsylvania’s Levittown was a massive project for a single builder. Using mass production techniques, the Levitts, along with countless other builders, created affordable housing for thousands of families. Intrigued by the Levittowns, journalists, novelists, sociologists, and planners exaggerated both their novelty and normality, using the term “Levittown” to invoke the best and worst of suburban living. The cookie cutter units came to symbolize both the conformity (everyone being the same) of American post-war consumer society and its promise of upward mobility (making a better life) and homeownership.

After World War II, pent-up demand, returning veterans, and favorable government loan guarantees fueled a booming housing market and an unprecedented surge of suburban development. Designed to attract blue-collar and lower-middle class workers, large-scale tracts of relatively modest housing proliferated (spread) across the Pennsylvania, particularly in the mid to late 1950s. Leading the way was Levitt and Sons of New York. During the Great Depression, the Levitt’s had built their business on custom-designed homes for the upper-middle class. Then during World War II, they constructed housing for the Navy at Norfolk, Virginia. In 1947, they undertook the largest housing development in American history at Island Trees on Long Island, New York, building some 17,500 houses by 1951. Taking advantage of government subsidies, veterans snapped them up as fast as they were built.

The Levitts intended to build another Long Island development, called Landia, but two events in 1950 altered their plans. Credit restrictions associated with the Korean War limited the Long Island housing market, and, as part of its restructuring, U.S. Steel announced plans to build the Fairless Works, a large integrated plant at Morrisville, Pennsylvania. Levitt and Sons quickly purchased a substantial tract between the site of the Fairless Works and Kaiser Metal Products. As on Long Island, the Levitts selected a site near defense industries and built housing to tap a local labor market.

In contrast to the piecemeal Long Island development, the “master plan” of this new Levittown called for a contiguous site, curvilinear streets with no houses facing the parkways, and clearly defined neighborhood units within master blocks. Eventually, neighborhood sizes ranged from 51 to 990 houses. Organized by housing types, the neighborhoods tended to separate income and family age levels, counter to the plan’s stated aims. To help provide identity, the street names within a given neighborhood began with the same letter. The plan also centered each master block of some 1,400 houses on an elementary school and recreational facilities, and replaced local shopping centers with a single “mile-long” shopping plaza.

Using only six single-family house types, the firm varied their appearance by alternating the placement of building components on the lots and offering a selection of exterior pastel colors. To limit costs, the Levitts reduced room size; replaced basements with radiantly heated concrete slabs; removed some spaces such as parlors; and purchased materials directly from manufacturers. Their military experience helped them revolutionize the construction process. Circumventing union regulations, armies of “subcontractors” assembled pre-cut and “combat loaded” materials (materials were loaded for each house before arrival). Workers moved from house site to house site where they performed one of more than 100 tasks in “an assembly line in reverse.” “It is boring; it is bad;” Alfred Levitt remarked in 1952, “but the reward of the green stuff seems to alleviate the boredom of the work”. Coming from near and far, materials included bamboo curtains from Japan which replaced closet doors. Built-in General Electric kitchens, full landscaping, and an optional expandable attic added to the sales appeal.

Crowds flocked to the sales office when it opened in December 1951. Some purchased homes to move out of the city and others to move closer to the steel works, including displaced workers from the declining anthracite region and steelworkers from western Pennsylvania. Although most shared modest incomes, Levittown’s residents represented many ethnic and religious groups, and built churches and synagogues on land donated by the developers. Writing in *Philadelphia Magazine*, David Bitten recalled an “unusual mix of liberal and conservative, Bronx-born Jew and Nanticoke coal cracker”. Fearing the reaction of potential “white” buyers, the Levitts refused, however, to sell to blacks. And indeed, when Daisy and William Myers, purchased a house from friends in 1957, some of their Levittown neighbors threatened and harassed the African American couple.

Source: Marker Story (Levittown Marker) ExplorePA History