

Post-War Suburbanization: Causes and Interpretations

Suburbanization was the movement of people out of the cities and into new neighborhoods surrounding the cities. After the Second World War this was helped by the passage of the G.I Bill and later the passage of the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956 and "white flight" of whites from the cities frustrated with changes resulting from the Civil Rights movement. This event began at the conclusion of World War Two and still continues today. One of the first people to create suburbs was William Levitt who built his Levittown communities in suburban New York, Philadelphia, and New Jersey. His planned communities benefited from the movement of people into suburbs.

Examine the quotes from several authors discussing post-war suburbanization and label their comments as (+) for positive about suburbanization or (-) for negative.

"Suburbia is becoming the most important single market in the country. It is the suburbanite who starts the mass fashions—for children, ...dungarees, vodka martinis, outdoor barbecues, functional furniture, [and] picture windows ... All suburbs are not alike, but they are more alike than they are different."
William H. Whyte, *Organization Man*.

"...In recent years an average of about 1,200,000 Americans moved to the suburbs every year. Suburbia's population... numbered about 30 million in 1953 and has grown by about one-half since 1944...Suburbia is the exemplification of the new and growing moneyed middle class.....The middle class Suburbia, rapidly growing larger and more affluent, is developing a way of life that seems eventually bound to become dominant in America. It has been a major force in the phenomenal rise in the nation's birth rate. It has centered its customs and conventions on the needs of children and geared its buying habits to them..."
Fortune Magazine

"The veteran needed a roof over his head, instead of giving him just a roof we gave him certain amenities," Levitt explains. "We divided it into sections and we put down schools, swimming pools, and a village green and necessity shopping centers, athletic fields, Little League diamonds. We wanted community living"
Ron Rosenbaum. "The House that Levitt Built." Esquire December 1983: 378-391.

"Building is being revolutionized by assembly-line construction with standardized materials. Geography is being upset by the movement and growth of mammoth new facilities for making aluminum, steel, power, atomic weapons...Starting from scratch, the Levitts will have converted eight square miles of open farm country into a densely populated community of 70,000. Paved streets, sewer lines, school sites, baseball diamonds, shopping center, parking lots, new railroad station, factory sidings, churches, trunk arteries, newspapers, garden clubs, swimming pools, doctors, dentists and town hall--all conceived in advance, all previously planned in one of the most colossal acts ever of mortal creation"
Kimball, Penn. "'Dream Town'- Large Economy Size." American Society Since 1945. Ed. William L. O'Neill. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969.

“Levittown is known largely for one reason: it epitomizes the revolution which has brought mass production to the housing industry. Its creator, Long Island's Levitt & Sons, Inc., has become the biggest builder of houses in the U.S...

The houses in Levittown, which sell for a uniform price of \$7,900, cannot be mistaken for castles. Each has a sharp-angled roof and a picture window, radiant heating in the floor, 12-by-16 ft. living room, bath, kitchen, two bedrooms on the first floor, and an "expansion attic" which can be converted into two more bedrooms and bath. The kitchen has a refrigerator, stove and Bendix washer; the living room a fireplace and a built-in Admiral television set....

The influence of Levitt & Sons on housing goes much further than the thresholds of its own houses. Its methods of mass production are being copied by many of the merchant builders in the U.S., who are putting up four of every five houses built today. It is such mass production on one huge site which is enabling U.S. builders to meet the post-war demand and to create the biggest housing boom in U.S. history....

At war's end, when the U.S. desperately needed 5,000,000 houses, the nation had two choices: the Federal Government could try to build the houses itself, or it could pave the way for private industry to the job, by making available billions in credit. The U.S. wisely handed the job to private industry, got 4,000,000 new units built since the war, probably faster and cheaper than could have been done any other way.

The Government has actually spent little cash itself. By insuring loans up to 95% of the value of a house, the Federal Housing Administration made it easy for a builder to borrow the money with which to build low-cost houses. The Government made it just as easy for the buyer by liberally insuring his mortgage. Under a new housing act signed three months ago, the purchase terms on low-cost houses with Government-guaranteed mortgages were so liberalized that in many cases buying a house is now as easy as renting it. The new terms: 5% down (nothing down for veterans) and 30 years to pay. Thus an ex-G.I. could buy a Levitt house with no down payment and installments of only \$56 a month.

The countless new housing projects made possible by this financial easy street are changing the way of life of millions of U.S. citizens, who are realizing for the first time the great American dream of owning their own home. NO longer must young married couples plan to start living in an apartment, saving for the distant day when they can buy a house. Now they can do it more easily than they can buy a \$2,000 car on the installment plan.

"Up From the Potato Fields, " *Time* 56. July 3, 1950.

“Those who lambasted suburbia...tended to ignore several basic facts: the boom in building energized important sectors of the economy, providing a good deal of employment; it lessened the housing shortage that had diminished the lives of millions during the Depression and war; and it enabled people to enjoy conveniences, such as modern bathrooms and kitchens, that they had not before.”

James Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, pg. 340.

“What the people were looking for were good schools, private space, and personal safety and they found them in the suburbs. It was the single tact home that offered growing families a private haven in a heartless world.”

Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers*

"The basic Levitt Cape Cod sold for \$7,990; later, an expanded ranch-style house sold for \$9,500. There were no down payment, no closing costs, and no secret extras. Veterans who signed up for the first Levitt houses had to put down a one-hundred-dollar deposit, which they eventually got back...The Levitts and their managers knew they had to change the essential philosophy of home building in order to meet their deadlines. They analyzed the construction process and broke it down into basic components. There were, they figured out, twenty-seven separate steps, so they would train twenty-seven separate teams--- each team would specialize in one step ... for it demanded less talented workers...By 1948 they were building 180 houses a week or, in effect, finishing thirty-six houses a day. It was, Bill Levitt noted, like clockwork: 'Eighteen houses completed on the shift from 8 to noon, and 18 more houses finished on the shift from 12:20 from 4:30...The first Levitt house could not have been simpler. It had four and a half baths and was designed with a young family in mind. The lots were 60 by 100 feet, and bill Levitt was proud of the fact the house took up only 12 percent of the lot"

David Halberstam, *The Fifties*

"Levittown represented the worst vision of the American future: bland people in bland houses leading bland lives. The houses were physically similar, theorized Mumford, so the people inside must be equally similar; an entire community was being made from a cookie cutter...a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances on uniform roads, in a treeless command waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same incomes, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to the same common mold."

Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformation, and Its Prospects*. Pg. 486.

"The community has an almost antiseptic air. Levittown streets, which have such fanciful names as Satellite, Horizon, Haymaker, are bare and flat as hospital corridors. Like a hospital, Levittown has rules all its own. Fences are not allowed (though here and there a home-owner has broken the rule). The plot of grass around each home must be cut at least once a week; if not, Bill Levitt's men mow the grass and send the bill. Wash cannot be hung out to dry on an ordinary clothesline; it must be arranged on rotary, removable drying racks and then not on weekends or holidays...."

"Up From the Potato Fields, " *Time* 56. July 3, 1950.

"The Negroes in America...are trying to do in 400 years what the Jews in the world have not wholly accomplished in 600 years. As I Jew I have no room in my mind or heart for racial prejudice. But...I have come to know that if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 or 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community. That is their attitude, not ours...As a company our position is simply this: we can solve a housing problem, or we can solve a racial problem, but we cannot combine the two."

William Levitt