

## CONSTRUCTION

In the spring of 1947, Levitt & Sons broke ground for a development of 2000 rental units for veterans and their families. Despite their modest size, the four-room Cape Cod bungalows would eventually offer the fulfillment of the American Dream of property, privacy, and independence. The houses were made possible by a series of amendments to the National Housing Act of 1934 which encouraged the production of low-cost housing. As a result of these changes, the veterans of World War II would return to a warmer welcome than that which had greeted their predecessors from earlier wars.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that the veterans were the only, or even the primary, reason for modifying the housing policies. The veterans were the formal beneficiaries of their efforts, but the postwar housing programs would have implications for American society as a whole. Although the rhetoric that promoted many of the reconversion policies may have emphasized the veterans' right to government assistance in reestablishing their peacetime lives as a *quid pro quo* for their service, the methods used to provide that the assistance assured that it would remain squarely within the American socio-political traditions.

Washington had drawn heavily on the lessons of the Depression and the solutions of the New Deal in planning for the postwar reconversion. Both the education titles of the GI Bill and the establishment of armies of occupation were designed to prevent a return to the economic difficulties of the 1930s. These policies served to reduce unemployment by restricting the flow of veterans into the labor force without resorting to obvious make-work projects or home-relief, which were evocative of socialism and the welfare state.

Similarly, the housing programs were designed as much to provide incentives to investors as to create housing. The mortgages were insured by the government, but they were issued by and through the private sector.<sup>2</sup> Moneys were funneled through several vital sectors of the economy, rather than through direct government

assistance. The preconditions for the housing programs were therefore deeply rooted in pre-New Deal American ideologies and meshed with long-established American beliefs that emphasized the importance of private property, personal initiative, and free enterprise, as well as the traditional nineteenth-century themes of republican virtue and Christian domesticity.

The opposition to government involvement in housing traditionally expressed by the business community was mitigated by the self-interest of banks and real estate investors, and of builders and suppliers, all of whom stood to gain in a revitalized housing market. Moreover, the stimulus to residential construction and related industries in domestic hard goods, which could be expected to generate increased employment, was an added inducement for those concerned about the needs of the American worker and his family.<sup>3</sup>

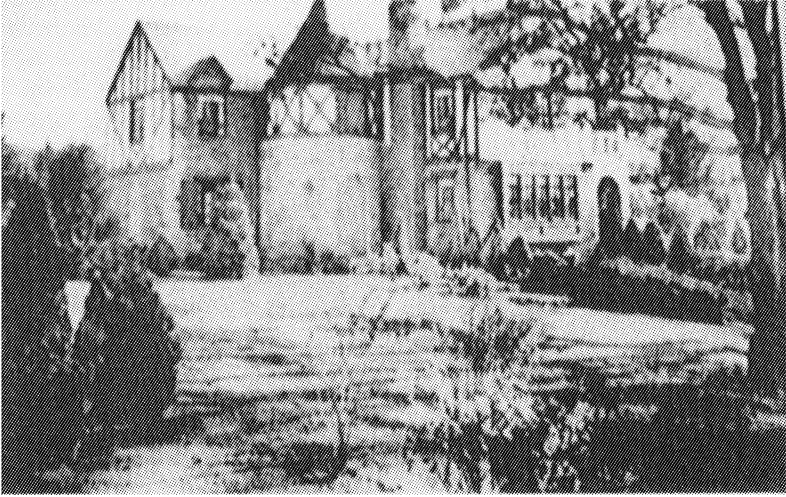
As a result, the postwar political climate was receptive to the expansion of New Deal housing policies. The returning soldier provided a sympathetic symbol around which to promote the postwar housing programs; he had earned the nation's support in his need for shelter.<sup>4</sup> Government-insured housing projects were cast as not only acceptable but expedient, both as a means of stimulating the reconversion economy and as compensation for the veterans' service to their country. Underlying and reinforcing these factors was the persistent American belief in homeownership as a concomitant of sound republicanism.

By 1947, builder-developers in large numbers were taking advantage of the emergency amendments to the National Housing Act to turn vacant or underutilized land into basic housing as quickly as possible. Few of them were newcomers to building; most had cut their economic teeth in the prewar period and come of age during the vast buildup of housing for defense workers after Pearl Harbor. However, it was the scale of their postwar construction that would catapult them into national prominence.<sup>5</sup>

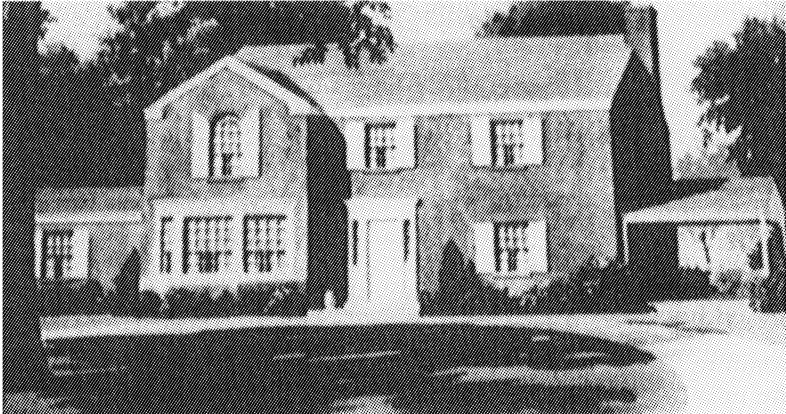
A number of circumstances fostered the changes in the scale of postwar residential construction. One was the housing crisis, which provided a ready market. Another was the technology developed during the defense buildup. The war had encouraged the builders to streamline the construction process through the development of new materials and methods for the rapid construction of inexpensive worker housing. Available land was still another factor. The rise of agribusiness in the West and the subsequent urban migrations at the turn of the century, coupled with the foreclosures of many family farms during the Depression, had contributed to a widespread

1.1

Model houses from Levitt & Sons' prewar Strathmore development, Manhasset, 1939. (NCM)



(a)



(b)

availability of large tracts of underutilized farmland in formerly rural areas, particularly in the Northeast. This land provided enterprising builders with the acreage needed to implement the new construction techniques on a cost-effective scale. All of these factors—a ready market, efficient technological strategies, and available land—in combination with government assistance and a sympathetic symbol, created an ideal builder's market in 1947.

One of those who would maximize the opportunity provided by the postwar situation was William J. Levitt, the president and general manager of the Manhasset firm of Levitt and Sons. In partnership with his father and brother, Levitt had been building homes on Long Island for over a decade when America entered World War II.<sup>6</sup> Their prewar production was limited to small developments in middle- and upper middle-class suburban communities on Long Island.

During the war, Levitt built emergency housing for defense workers in the form of houses at Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>7</sup> The four-room, slab-based units at Norfolk bore little resemblance to any prewar houses built by Levitt and Sons, but their components provided the prototype for many of the innovations that would be incorporated into the firm's postwar construction, especially those at Island Trees.<sup>8</sup>

The housing shortages—for defense workers during the war, and for veterans after it—opened the window to many substantive changes in residential construction. Neither unions nor local governments wanted to risk being charged with obstructing either the war effort or needed solutions to the veterans' housing crisis, and one by one traditional building practices and codes gave way to a variety of factory-like methods implemented at the construction site. These methods produced houses that were rudimentary and standardized, but they were available and affordable.

Although Levitt would greatly expand his fortune by incorporating these new methods in the Island Trees project, the use of the new methods was not enough. He would also need the skills to take advantage of the opportunities that the housing shortage was creating in the form of economic support from the federal government and the subversion of local building and zoning codes.

The Veterans Emergency Housing Program (VEHP), under which the first houses at Levittown were built, had been announced by President Truman in February 1946. The original VEHP goal was the construction of more than two and a half million units of housing by late 1948.<sup>9</sup> Headed by Housing Expeditor Wilson Wyatt, the short-lived VEHP was part of Truman's war reconversion program

## 1.2

Midwest City, Oklahoma, built in 1942 by William Atkinson as defense workers' housing for Tinker Air Force Base. (1987 photo, Author's collection)



and called for such emergency measures as continued rent control, "strict allocation of scarce materials," and money to encourage their production, as well as loans under the New Deal's Reconstruction Finance Corporation to nurture the infant industry in factory-produced houses. The agency also projected a goal of 750,000 prefabricated dwellings by the end of 1947. The housing bill of 1947 reemphasized the government's interest in prefabrication in the housing industry and offered monetary guarantees to those who would venture into the field.<sup>10</sup>

Although Levitt did not deal directly with prefabrication, his reorganization of the traditional construction methods was a modified version of the prefabrication process.<sup>11</sup> He, along with other large-scale builder/developers, incorporated many of the techniques of his defense-housing projects into his postwar projects. These production methods were referred to in trade publications and news releases as "on-site fabrication," and the construction sites as "on-site factories." These terms placed the builders in a semantic posi-

tion to take advantage of a variety of legislative supports that might emerge from the housing debates in Congress. Their "on-site factories" might qualify if pre-fabrication were to be funded, whereas their Cape Cods would fill the bill if more traditional methods were favored.

In addition to government support, the builders needed the cooperation and support of their workers. Traditional construction methods would have to give way to modern techniques; union job descriptions, pay scales, and seniority rankings would have to be renegotiated. Rather than alienate the industry's rank and file by imposing these changes, Levitt enlisted their support. He hired his workers as subcontractors in order to bypass the union leadership and contract terms. By contracting directly with the workers he was able to pay them not by the hour, but by the number of completed production units, thereby evading the union scale restrictions on hours, skills, and seniority. This arrangement had the intended result of inducing the workers to produce more units per day, using the techniques of the on-site factory.<sup>12</sup>

The speed of production was unprecedented. Contemporary commentators compared the process to an automobile assembly line in reverse. Where at General Motors the car would move from worker to worker, on the construction site it was the worker who moved. Workers moved in teams from unit to unit, completing just one stage of the construction before moving on to repeat that stage at the next site. Levitt also redesigned the work week; in order to reduce the loss of work time, the week's rainy or other bad weather days were traded for Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays.<sup>13</sup> Acres upon acres appeared to turn overnight into houses, complete with streets and landscaping.

In retrospect, the construction of Levittown would be treated as something of a cultural turning point in suburban development, but at the time there was little other than the scale and speed of production that attracted public attention.<sup>14</sup> Between April and July of 1948, the production rate in Levittown rose from 60 houses per week to 150.<sup>15</sup> The speed with which his contractors worked was an important factor in the reputation that Levitt was developing as a major solver of the housing shortage.

Levitt also made excellent use of the new materials and techniques, especially standardized components, which were just coming into their own in 1947. His houses were built in multiples of four feet to take the greatest advantage of 4' × 8' sheetrock panels. He arranged to have some 14 carloads of precut or partly assembled

materials delivered by the Long Island Railroad to the Island Trees site.<sup>16</sup> He bought supplies—hardware, appliances, and cabinetry—in bulk, directly from the manufacturer. This was done not only to bypass the profits of the middleman but to guarantee, through sheer volume, the ability to acquire the newly deregulated white goods, which were in short supply. Where that was not feasible, Levitt created a vertical monopoly on building materials in order to bypass the middleman's profits and eliminate competition from other buyers. He invested in a forest in California with a nearby lumber mill to avert a lumber shortage, and built a nail factory on the property when nails were hard to get.<sup>17</sup> *Architectural Forum*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Architectural Record*, and *Time* all covered the story of the construction of Levittown, commenting favorably on the pace and rate, as Levitt industrialized the building trade on Long Island.

Ironically, more than half of the first 2000 houses of Levittown would be built on land belonging to the estate of a man who had attempted to create a community of rental houses nearby, and failed. The land had originally been purchased in the mid-nineteenth century by the Manhattan merchant/developer A. T. Stewart. Stewart had bought a vast tract of the Long Island plains (seven thousand acres, stretching from Franklin Square to Hicksville). On part of it he created Garden City, his planned community of rental houses. In reporting the sale of the property, *Harper's Weekly* foreshadowed the hyperbole that would mark Levitt's later announcements of his plans for the area:

This tract cost Mr. Stewart \$400,000; and we understand that it is his design to spend from six to ten millions of dollars in the erection upon it of homes for the working-classes of New York and Brooklyn. This design is so gigantic that it throws into the shade every attempt of the kind hitherto made. . . .

With the improvements which Mr. Stewart will carry out; with a township of beautiful and healthful homes; with parks, gardens, and public buildings for educational purposes and for those of amusement, Hempstead Plains, hitherto a desert, will be made to blossom as the rose; it will be the most beautiful suburb in the vicinity of New York. God speed the undertaking.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of renting did not appeal to the constituency for whom Stewart had built, and his idea of a working-class suburb was never fully realized.<sup>19</sup> The Merillon Estates properties that Levitt

bought were among several undeveloped parcels of land remaining from Stewart's estate.<sup>20</sup> Stewart's Garden City, meanwhile, had become a solidly middle-class community, with large single-family homes set on wide lawns on shady, tree-lined, streets.<sup>21</sup>

Levitt was about to recreate Stewart's dream of a rental community on a more modest scale; he would tailor his twentieth-century version for a lower socioeconomic market than that for which Stewart had planned his suburb.<sup>22</sup> In so doing, Levitt ran the risk of alienating nearby residents, many of whom viewed renting as less socially acceptable than owning. Local residents considered the houses to be substandard, due in part to their size and in part to the replacement of traditional materials with newer, less expensive, and seemingly less substantial ones. Moreover, most were opposed to lower-income rental projects within their middle-class suburban county on economic grounds. The redlining of lower-income housing districts by the FHA had its parallel in the suburban fear of property devaluation due to contiguous "nuisances."

But Levitt did not have to face these objections alone. Among those who provided the necessary support were George Hubbell, who arranged the sale of the land; the fledgling newspaper *Newsday*, which defended the technological innovations Levitt used to produce the houses; and—by default, if not design—the preeminent urban developer, Robert Moses.

George Hubbell was a senior partner in the real estate firm of Hubbell, Klapper, and Hubbell. Along with his partner, Theodore Klapper, he had been playing an important role in the development of Nassau County for over a quarter of a century when Levitt began buying property in Island Trees in 1946.<sup>23</sup> Hubbell was also the general manager of the Merillon Corporation and Garden City Estates, the holding companies for the remaining land of the A. T. Stewart Estate, all of which had become Levittown by 1948.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the firm of Hubbell, Klapper, and Hubbell represented those companies when the land was sold to Levitt. There is no indication in the local newspaper coverage of this period that either Hubbell, who represented the land, or Klapper, who was serving as a member of the town planning commission, were opposed to Levitt's plans for the property.<sup>25</sup>

Nor was the Town of Hempstead. Despite some early and perhaps *pro forma* resistance, the building and zoning board was cooperative, revising the town's prewar building code in order to accommodate the radical new method of slab-based construction that Levitt proposed. At their meeting on May 27, 1947, the town board



repealed section 809 of Article 8 of the Hempstead Town building law. The meeting was heavily attended, largely by veterans and their families in need of housing.

In a later interview, Levitt claimed to have drummed up the veteran support himself.<sup>26</sup> He may well have done so, but not without help. *Newsday's* promotion of Levittown was unabashed boosterism, which will be made clearer in later chapters. Just starting its career, the paper would naturally stand to benefit from an increase in the area's population. In an editorial on May 11, 1947, *Newsday* had urged veterans to support Levitt's plan for the basement-less houses by turning out in force at the hearing. Whether generated by Levitt or by *Newsday*, the show of support may not have been necessary.

In a welcoming column in the first issue of the *Island Trees Eagle*, A. Holly Patterson, the presiding supervisor of Hempstead Town, pointed out that the board had "acted as promptly as the law would permit on all requests for the construction of your comfortable little homes" and assured the new residents that the town had not opposed either the houses or the new technology, but had simply followed appropriate procedures for revising the code.<sup>27</sup> Although it may be that the Patterson column, directed at the new residents of Levittown, was in part a face-saving maneuver designed to capture the political loyalty of the new residents, the town had certainly not offered any serious resistance to the code revision.

Robert Moses' role, on the other hand, was more subtle; in the area of planning and development on Long Island, Moses' lack of opposition was tantamount to approval. The earliest parcels of Levittown were located within a triangle described by three of Moses' state parkways. Given the combination of Moses' interest in planning, his power across the state at the time, and the location of Levittown, it is hardly likely that he was unaware, much less disapproving, of the project.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the recorded lack of opposition, there is suggestive evidence that such opposition did exist, and that some of it was extremely potent. Among the construction unions whose traditional power was challenged by Levitt and his new technologies was the sheathers' union. When one of the Levitt experimental models in Albertson exploded on May 1, 1947, *The Nassau Daily Review Star* assured its readers that the explosion appeared to be unrelated to the sheathers' union's picketing of Levitt and Sons construction sites. The need to add such a statement suggests that, to at least one journalist, the involvement of the sheathers was a distinct possi-

bility.<sup>29</sup> Although there is no further indication of organized opposition, the town rejected Levitt's application to replace the code-mandated  $\frac{3}{4}$ " sheathing with the less labor-intensive,  $\frac{5}{16}$ " plywood sheets.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the town might well have wanted to ensure a climate of positive public opinion for their code changes in order to minimize political opposition among local labor groups, as well as among the more established communities.

It was while his innovations were still in contention, and before ground was broken for the project that Levitt announced the availability of the first of the rental units at Island Trees.<sup>31</sup> Within weeks after the initial construction was underway, the Levitt organization had announced plans to add another 4000 units to the Island Trees/Levittown project. The public response—as recorded in the local press—was overwhelmingly favorable.<sup>32</sup>

That there were rumors of "there goes the neighborhood" and considerable public opposition to the development can only be inferred from *Newsday's* *ad hominem* attacks on nameless "elitists" who criticized the project. The defensive tone registered about the quality of their homes by the early residents of Levittown and the residue of disapproval that persists among some residents of the older, surrounding neighborhoods even today also lend credence to the belief that the development was not as well received by the existing communities as the media were suggesting. One such criticism, by a Hempstead Town councilman running for reelection from a neighboring community, was roundly denounced in a *Newsday* editorial.<sup>33</sup> Levitt's media blitz successfully kept such criticism to a minimum. His press releases and news conferences pitted the plight of the homeless veterans against the proposed solution—the Levitt rental housing project at Island Trees. By implication, this solution was impeded only by the town and county's obstinacy over details in building and zoning regulations.

Yet, despite the confident tone expressed in the news coverage, Levitt appears to have been ambivalent about the future direction of the development from the very beginning.<sup>34</sup> While the rental project was still under construction, he had built 191 of the Cape Cod models a few miles west of Island Trees to test the sales market. From May until July 1947, press releases from the Levitt organization, coupled with editorials in *Newsday* and comments from the paper's readership, focused almost exclusively on the rental housing. Yet, when the availability of the houses was formally announced, it was in the form of an advertisement for those houses that were being constructed for sale. The rental housing, on the other hand, was

not advertised. There was little need to advertise it; the public had been kept aware of this development through Levitt's press conferences and *Newsday's* supportive editorial commentary.<sup>35</sup>

In October the first of the rental units were made available at \$60 per month with a one-year lease, for veterans only. This corresponded with existing federal law.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the advertised mortgage payment on the other houses, "\$52 A MONTH, FOR VETERANS ONLY," was almost ten dollars lower than the monthly rental at Island Trees, and—coupled with full financing of the mortgage—made the proprietary housing by far the better investment for home-seeking veterans.<sup>37</sup>

Levitt had also made clear early in the project that he did not

under ordinary conditions, believe in rentals. However, this is the only way to enable the former serviceman, who is without sufficient funds, or whose life is still somewhat in a state of flux, to secure a home, a pleasant home, at a reasonable cost. We may, in the future, announce the homes of Levittown for sale, although this is not, as yet, definite. If we do offer them for sale, we assure the present tenants, that they will be permitted to re-lease on a rental basis for at least another year.<sup>38</sup>

Levitt's apparent ambivalence about the rental project at Island Trees is, in retrospect, not surprising. Even as the ground was being broken for the first of the houses the political situation regarding lower-income housing had begun to show signs of change; before Levittown was completed, changes in federal housing policies would limit the profit margin in rental housing while encouraging the construction of proprietary housing. Emergency rent controls were extended, and the construction of privately owned single-family dwellings was stimulated through various forms of government-sponsored insurance and incentive programs. In one of its most wide-reaching provisions, section 505 of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act—the GI Bill—underwrote the economic risk inherent in the construction and finance of low-cost houses for veterans by insuring their fully financed mortgages in conjunction with existing FHA policies. This provision would result in the construction of tens of thousands of proprietary housing units for lower-income veterans.<sup>39</sup>

Insiders in the housing field had good reason to expect that government support would be moving away from programs that promoted rental housing toward others which fostered home own-

ership.<sup>40</sup> Their business decisions would reflect those expectations. William Levitt was no exception. In December 1947, two months after his first tenants had moved in, the substance of Levitt's press releases in the local community papers underwent a subtle change. After several weeks in which his announcements were those of a benevolent landlord, Levitt's weekly news releases began to mention the possibility of home ownership for his Levittown tenants. As noted, these suggestions that the firm "might" make the homes available for purchase, at least to the present tenants, were juxtaposed to the announcement of a pending rent increase.

In addition, Levitt's hints at divestiture coincided with President Truman's efforts to extend existing rent controls. Despite the strong attack on his domestic policies by the conservative 80th Congress, President Truman did manage to salvage the rent control provisions of the Housing and Rent Act of 1947 for at least one additional year. Continued rent control would seriously diminish the return on investments in large-scale rental projects such as Levittown.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the rental projects tied up millions of dollars in capital, which the builders could use to greater advantage. Across the country, operative builders like Levitt began to divest themselves of their rental properties. The war years had taught them much about their profession, and about the need to adapt quickly to new conditions.

Levitt began preparing the tenants for the transition from rental to ownership. "News" articles in the *Island Trees* newspapers—one of which Levitt had bought—informed the tenants about new developments in Washington, particularly those affecting veterans. A column was introduced that offered the tenants advice for taking advantage of the loan programs being offered by the GI Bill. In a manner consistent with the public image he was creating, Levitt presented the proposed transition as a generous offer to his tenants, rather than a profit-motivated business decision.<sup>42</sup>

The actual transition, by which Levitt would begin to dispose of the rental units, began in the spring of 1948. Truman's extension of the rent control provision—originally scheduled to expire on March 31, 1948—was extended through March 1949.<sup>43</sup> Levitt divested himself of most of the 6000 rental units, along with the real estate company through which he had managed them. Those he could not sell directly to the tenants he transferred, along with the Bethpage Realty Company, to a Philadelphia-based adult education project known as *Junto*, which continued to rent the houses.<sup>44</sup> His capital regained, Levitt then began work on the second phase of the

project through which he would eventually earn his reputation. In less than a decade, Levitt and Sons had matured from a relatively obscure building firm to national prominence as “the nation’s biggest house builder”—a reputation for which he and his news releases were largely responsible.<sup>45</sup>

At its completion the development would incorporate 17,447 four-room houses spreading over two towns (including some six hamlets) crossing municipal, postal, school, and fire district lines. In addition to the houses, Levittown had seven “village greens” with shops and services, nine swimming pools, and a community meeting hall, all provided by the builder. The community—residents as well as religious and civic leaders—provided churches, synagogues, schools, and libraries, and local merchants added such recreational activities as bowling alleys, skating rinks, and movies.