

Levittown: Making America Suburban

Homeowners' Guide and Images

The majority of Americans currently live in suburban settlements, usually composed of modest single-family homes, with a patch of grass in front and a small, fenced-in yard in back. But this was not always the case. Until the late 1940s the towns just at the edge of major cities were typically privileged enclaves of the elite, and most Americans lived and worked in cities, small towns, or the countryside. Many did not have the money to own a home.

The end of World War II in 1945 brought the return of sixteen million GIs, many of whom expected to start families. There was no place to house them. The decade of economic depression during the 1930s and five years of war in the 1940s had left the country with a severe housing shortage, estimated at five million units or more. Returning soldiers and their families were sometimes compelled to live in barns, abandoned trolley cars, unheated bungalows, and tool sheds.

Abraham Levitt and his two sons helped change all this in 1947, by building Levittown, the first modern mass-produced suburb, on an abandoned Long Island potato farm just outside New York City. Helped by their low-interest "GI loans," returning soldiers and their families (indeed, anyone with a little bit of money) could buy a Levittown home outfitted with a modern stove, refrigerator, washing machine, and oil burner for just a \$90 deposit and \$58 a month. Levitt took advantage of the housing crisis to transform homebuilding, avoiding union labor, building on poured concrete slabs, in violation of laws requiring basements, and undermining traditional craftsmen by factory cutting building materials in his lumberyard and nail factory in California.

The growing car culture and affluent postwar consumer culture favored Levitt's creation, which was so popular that in 1950 Levitt was featured on the cover of Time magazine, having constructed over 15,000 homes at the rate of thirty per day. Levitt's vision would literally transform the landscape, determining the pattern of life for generations of Americans.

The following document is taken from a homeowners' guide Levitt provided for new residents of the Buck's County, Pennsylvania, Levittown. The images are a photograph of a typical Levittown street and the cover of a Levittown brochure. In its twenty-seven sections the guide covers everything from how to use a fireplace to maintenance of door locks. Since many Levittown homeowners were from cities and had never lived in a single-family house before, five pages are devoted to garden-maintenance

"Homeowners' Guide: Some Information for Residents of Levittown to Help Them Enjoy Their New Homes," 1, 2-3, 4, 12-13, 16, 20.

tasks, including how often good neighbors should mow the lawn. Though there is nothing in the handbook about it, Levitt and Sons decided early on to restrict their planned community to white people only. The federal government accepted this and, as a result, Levittowns remain disproportionately white to this day.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways did owning a Levittown home change the way families coming from cities lived?
2. How do you think people who already lived in the area viewed the arrival of Levittown and their new neighbors? How do you imagine their lives changing?
3. Many people have criticized Levittown for homogenizing American housing and creating vast, ugly suburban sprawl. What is your perspective on the pluses and minuses of these new suburbs? How do the images included inform your perspective?
4. What arguments does this guide make to motivate first time homeowners to do things "by the book"?
5. Compare and contrast the photograph of Levittown and the brochure cover. What differences do you notice right away? How do you account for those differences?



Street in Levittown.



Levittown sales brochure, 1957.

TEACHING CITY FOLK TO BE SUBURBANITES

Welcome to Levittown!

You have just purchased what we believe to be the finest house of its size in America. We wish you health and happiness in Levittown for many years to come.

In order that you may enjoy your house, and derive the utmost pleasure from it, we have undertaken to prepare this handbook so that you may better understand our position and your responsibilities. . . .

Electrical

Now let us start at the front door and walk through your new home. The two electrical switches as you enter control the foyer light and the light over the front door in the Country Clubber. In the Jubilee the two switches control the outside light and a receptacle on the front wall of the living room. In your kitchen you will find the oil burner emergency switch, clearly identified by a red plate.

Your circuit breaker is located in the #2 bedroom closet of the Jubilee, and in the garage of the Country Clubber. No fuses are required. Upon any lighting failure check your circuit breaker first. Simply reset the switch by returning it to its normal position. Repeated tripping of the breaker indicates a short circuit.

You will find ample receptacles conveniently located throughout the house. In rooms not provided with a lighting fixture the wall switch controls the nearest receptacle. Do not use any greater than 60 watt bulbs or 75 watt spot type bulbs in your ceiling recessed fixtures. You must supply a 40 watt 48 inch "rapid" starting fluorescent bulb for the bathroom of the Jubilee. In the Country Clubber you must supply four standard light bulbs for each bathroom. You will find that 40 watt bulbs will supply ample illumination.

Your dining room light fixture was designed for a standard 100 watt bulb.

Condensation

Condensation is the formation of water, usually on a very smooth surface. It takes place when warm, moist air comes in contact with a cold surface. Your new home has been tightly constructed and well insulated. Moisture created by your living activities in the house and the operation of your modern home appliances can therefore only be expelled by adequate ventilation. The normal living habits of a family of four people, using shower, washing dishes, cooking, and the use of automatic appliances, create 18 gallons of moisture each week. Be sure to air out your home for at least a few minutes each day. The use of your exhaust fan and adequate window ventilation are the simple, practical steps that can be taken by you to allow moisture to escape. . . .

The Lawn and Its Upkeep

No single feature of a suburban residential community contributes so much to the charm and beauty of the individual home and locality as well-kept lawns. Stabilization of values, yes, increase in values, will most often be found in those neighborhoods where lawns show as green carpets, and trees and shrubbery join

to impart the sense of residential elegance. Where lawns and landscape material are neglected the neighborhood soon assumes a sub-standard or blighted appearance and is naturally shunned by the public. Your investment in your garden is large at the beginning, but will grow larger and larger as the years go by. For while furniture, houses and most material things tend to depreciate with the years, your lawn, trees and shrubs become more valuable both esthetically and monetarily.

We grade your premises, fertilize the soil, then seed and roll the lawn. After that we turn the newly made lawn over to you for your care. The first thing to do is to water for many hours a day. The grass seed will not germinate otherwise; most of the seed will dry up. There is one way and only one way to water a lawn. Use an *OVERHEAD SPRINKLER* on one spot for a short time then shift the sprinkler to another spot. If you use it too long on any one place on a lawn, it will create puddles and will wash out the seed. *DON'T USE THE HOSE WITH NOZZLE ATTACHED; THE SEED WILL BE WASHED AWAY.* Don't step on a soft lawn especially with high heeled shoes; use a board or several of them. Try to keep children from running over the new soil, though we admit that is no easy task.

The Care of Trees, Shrubs, and Evergreens

Now the first thing to do to newly transplanted material is to water it. We have given this advice again and again and to see the neglect of many owners in this respect is extremely disheartening. Many who attempt to water do more harm than good. There is but one way to water a newly transplanted tree, shrub or evergreen. Place the hose (*WITHOUT NOZZLE*) at the root of the plant and give it a good soaking. For a large tree proceed from several positions. The hole or holes made by rushing water should be plugged up when through watering.

Important

Never use a hose to water your lawn. Always use an overhead sprinkler. You cannot grow a lawn if you water it with a hose, especially with a nozzle attached. Don't even keep a nozzle on your premises; it will only do harm!