



# For Sale

# The American Dream

The picture-perfect suburban lifestyle was marketed to millions of Americans looking for an escape from crowded cities.

# When the real estate developers Levitt & Sons turned a Long Island potato field into the country's first planned suburban community in 1947, it marked a new chapter in the quest for home ownership

By Joshua Ruff

Say the name "Levittown," and you've just opened the cover to an American postwar picture album. Go ahead, flip the pages: the aerial photograph of a landscape of identical houses looking like a black-and-white checkerboard ...down below, a young ex-GI and his family smile broadly in front of their new home, a Chevy sedan in their driveway... inside the front door, Tupperware parties and paint-by-number kits...out the back door, a new power mower, pitcher of lemonade and a smoky backyard barbecue. Hear the saxophone?

Levittown, Long Island, the most famous American postwar suburban development, was a household name, the "Exhibit A" of suburbia. It came on the eve of the baby boom and just before the 1948 Housing Bill liberalized lending, allowing anyone to buy a home with 5 percent down and extending mortgage terms to 30 years. Millions of families needed homes. Housing starts were down during the Depression and World War II. Returning vets armed with their GI Bill of Rights and guaranteed Veterans Administration low-interest loans wanted to move into places of their own. The Federal Housing Administration was guaranteeing loans from bankers to builders, and Long Island farmland was going cheap.

Real estate developers Levitt & Sons saw an opportunity in the potato fields near Hempstead, N.Y., and they

bought up the land, envisioning small, affordable homes there. They also rethought home building: Cut out the middlemen suppliers, streamline construction, circumvent local zoning codes and keep labor unions at arm's length. When the last nail was driven in 1951, 17,447 houses stood in Levittown.

But Levittown was about more than just the houses. As the largest and most influential housing development of its time, it became a postwar poster child for everything right (affordability, better standard of living) and wrong (architectural monotony, poor planning, racism) with suburbia.

Levittown, right from the start, was famous. It was also an intensely image-conscious place. "It is a poor week when Levitt houses aren't featured in at least one full-column story in the New York newspapers," wrote a reporter in *Fortune* magazine in 1947. In the early days, everyone from Levitt & Sons' P.T. Barnum-esque president, William J. Levitt, to the community's residents was in on the promotion. In 1951 Levittown was featured by *Collier's* magazine in "the biggest flash photograph ever attempted." The picture was snapped from the top of Levittown's 200-foot water tower, using 1,500 flash bulbs. Volunteers were not hard to find. "Nourished on national

publicity," the magazine reported, "the suburbanites pitched in." Residents gleefully blocked off streets and raised the flash bulbs. "If this isn't the biggest, brightest,



Snapshots from suburbia: Levittown in the early days represented American vitality after more than a decade of economic depression and wartime restrictions.

most ambitious birthday card ever presented to a four-year-old," gushed *Collier's*, "what is?"

Levittown's portrait may have been carefully staged, but it was in demand. Americans soon found echoes of the place everywhere, as overnight suburban communities mushroomed up from Park Forest, Ill., to Lakewood, Calif. Its seemingly magical creation—just a few years earlier, there were potato plants where those carports now stood—perfectly captured the pace of a hurry-it-up decade. Patience had been killed by 15 years of economic depression, war and an epidemic housing shortage. People wanted the full package—the affordable house, the new appliances, the suburban

**‘ People wanted the full package—the affordable house, the new appliances, the suburban lifestyle—and they wanted it right away ’**

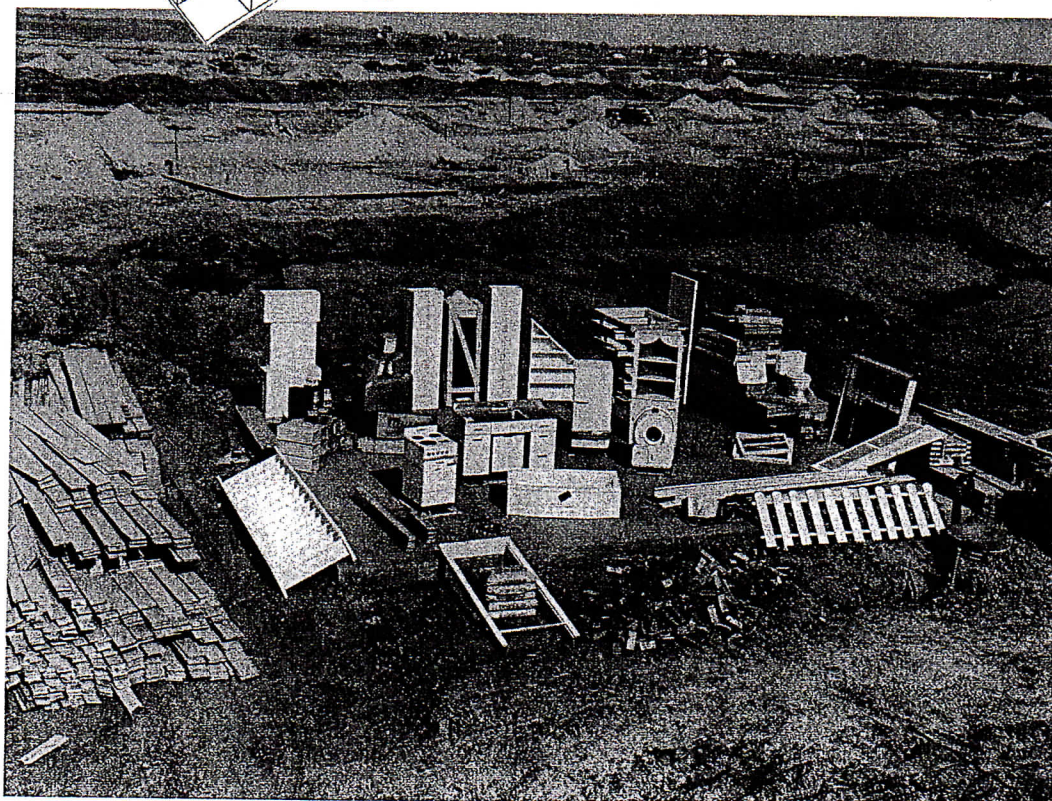
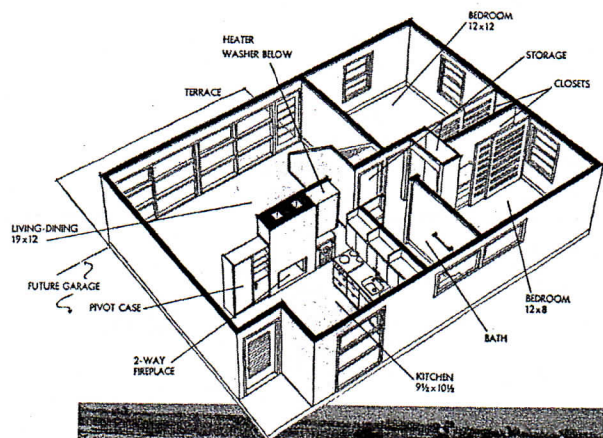
lifestyle—and they wanted it right away.

Levittown's promotion was also a defensive reply to criticism. Attacks were launched by architectural critic Lewis Mumford; John Keats, author of the scathing antisuburbia novel *A Crack in the Picture Window*; and a handful of other writers who never set foot in the place but were content to lam-

baste it from their city offices. Ironically, Mumford's complaint that Levittown was a "uniform environment from which escape is impossible" ignored the architectural sameness (block after block of overcrowded apartments) many new suburbanites were fleeing from in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

**C**ertainly for the inhabitants of Levittown, more disturbing complaints came from their Long Island neighbors. Wealthy Gold Coast residents were concerned with property values and a decline in prestige with the arrival of the urban working class in their "boxy little" houses. An editorial in a local newspaper, the *Island Trees Tribune*, noted this as early as December 4, 1947: "It seems that the people of the surrounding areas were a bit afraid of what sort of people would move into [Levittown]."

Helen Hooper, 27 years old when she moved from Queens in



The average size of a single-family home has tripled since the Levitts built their standardized 700-to 800-square-foot houses (left). The Levittown community (opposite) offered many residents a sense of freedom that they couldn't find in the city. Critics, however, condemned the endless rows of "little boxes made of ticky-tacky" as stifling and conformist.



1949, remembered similar attitudes in long-settled nearby villages: "They resented it when they knew you came from Levittown." She frequently felt icy, awkward stares: "When you went in there to shop, they kind of looked at you funny." Even some of her own relatives felt she'd made a mistake. "They'd look around...bang the walls. And they all told us, 'In ten years they're going to go through this place with a bulldozer and knock it down, it's going to be a slum.'"

Competing builders made the same criticisms. *Fortune* reported Levittown's critics proclaiming their doubts over "rotten masonry, green lumber, inferior workmanship."

The houses, however, were well made, a fact that longtime residents continue to point to with pride. George Merritt, a U.S. Navy veteran who moved into the community in 1955, was impressed with his original house even as he added on to it. The Levittown carpenters "did a job, man, I'm telling you," he said. From copper coil radiant heating to brass-zinc covered nails, the builder didn't scrimp—at least not on materials. Merritt was astonished when he pulled the doorway out of his kitchen: "That door must have had 40 nails in it! When I finally got it ripped off it said on the back 'Treated with Woodlife.' I didn't



Thanks to the GI Bill, the rate of home ownership increased from one in three Americans before World War II to two in three after the war.

even know they made that then, but he [William Levitt] really...did a good job. Unbelievable." As with many other residents, Merritt's considerable sweat equity improved his home over the years, starting with a front bay window.

Levitt & Sons was in its 18th year of business when it started the neighborhood of Island Trees, renamed Levittown in 1948. Abraham Levitt, a real estate lawyer, had founded the company in 1929 and appointed his son William as president, and son Alfred as vice president, chief architect and planner. In 1941 the family had won a wartime contract with the navy to build 2,350 homes in Norfolk, Va. To meet the deadlines, the Levitts divided the building process into 27 separate steps—a mass production technique that would serve the company for years to come.

In Levittown, as in Norfolk, work crews were dedicated to specific tasks—plumbing, electrical wiring and roofing—that streamlined construction and kept costs down. Nonunion workers were employed as "unskilled" laborers, not craftsman. They made their money through piecework, not the hourly rate that unionized construction workers were accustomed to getting in the nearby

## Home Decorating, '50s Style

Spending power was on the rise in the 1950s. But most American money wasn't going toward luxury vacations or other treats people had not indulged in since before the Great Depression. Discretionary income went right into their new suburban kitchens and living rooms. In fact, five years after World War II, spending on household items was up 240 percent. Americans bought 75 percent of all the world's new household appliances in the 1950s.

Consumer desires were certainly stoked by what suburbanites read and watched on television. *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal* and other publications became the source of inspiration for

Making ice at home got easier in 1952 with Servel's automatic ice maker.

home decorators everywhere. Unfinished attics were an exciting decorating opportunity, not an eyesore to ignore. One magazine suggested: "It's a lot of fun fixing up an attic.... Those odd pieces of furniture that you have retired from active service can be recalled to home-front duty again." In Levittown, the com-

munity magazine *Thousand Lanes*, backed primarily by the remodeling industry, was filled with ads for lumberyards, hardware stores, carpenters, painters and contractors. It became a prime "how-to" resource.

The television set became both the most important piece of home furnishing and an enormous influ-

ence on decorating behavior. Viewers laughed when Lucy Ricardo sold all the family furniture, or when Alice described Ralph Kramden's wallpaper choice as "Early Halloween." What suburban residents saw on their screens mirrored their own daily decorating choices.

Meanwhile, consumer items featured a design aesthetic that was distinctly new: vibrant pastel colors, futuristic and scientific motifs ("atomic"-style wall clocks) and flowing, sensuous chromed lines that made new Frigidaires seem like the close siblings of Buick sedans. Linoleum tile floors came in a wide palette of colors. Made from "indestructible asbestos," according to one ad, they "saved hours of cleaning time."

This is not to say that suburbanites were always eager for the constant buzz of the sales pitch.

city. A roofing crew, for example, made \$60 per finished roof, usually split three ways. "It was a well-oiled machine and you could make more money that way," remembers Edward Konop, a construction superintendent for the Levitts from 1947 to 1954.

To evade one of the more difficult demands of the Town of Hempstead's zoning laws—that all homes have basements—William Levitt engineered a community meeting in front of the town board, and several hundred people showed up. One resident stood up and shouted: "You want basements? I'm living in a basement. It's my mother-in-law's." The code was rescinded, and the company had its easier-to-build slab foundation Cape Cod homes. At the top of its game, Levitt & Sons was capable of building one house every 16 minutes. That became part of the sales pitch.

The first homes were available for rent only, with an option to buy after one year for \$6,990. Rent was \$60 a month. In March 1949, Levitt & Sons began selling the houses upfront, and more than 1,000 couples arrived at the sales office. Levitt plastered the newspapers with advertisements designed to attract one and all, especially young war veterans. The first homes were just 4½ rooms: 2 bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, bathroom and an

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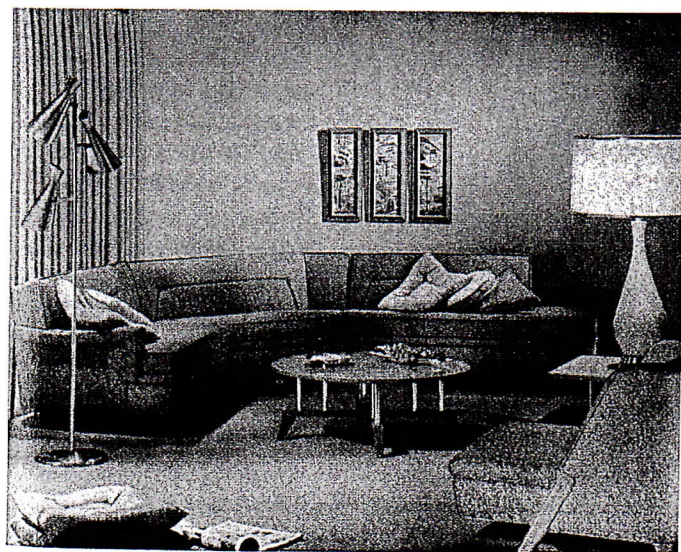
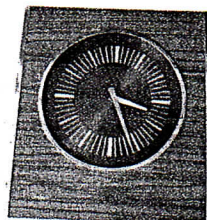
"expansion attic"—not much bigger than some of the city apartments the GIs were leaving behind. As one reporter put it, "They might not be considered the 'dream homes' soldiers thought about in the foxholes across the world a few years back," but they were enough. The Cape Cods and each successive Ranch remodel offered in 1949, 1950 and 1951

sold out even before the developers finished building them.

**I**n some ways, Levittown resembled the ethnic composition of the military during World War II: Jews, Italians, Irish and Poles living side-by-side. But also like most of the military, African Americans were unable to enter this melting pot. As with many homebuilders in his era, William Levitt didn't question the demands of his financial backers, the FHA, which supported nationwide racial covenants and "redlining"—or devaluing—racially mixed communities. Every Levittown rental lease and homeowner's contract barred those that were "not member(s) of the Caucasian race."

Levitt defended the housing restrictions long after the first residents moved into Levittown, stating that he was just following the social customs of the times. "This is their [the white

The busy decorator in 1957 could save "hours of work" with Sears' mix-and-match line of Harmony House furnishings (below). Sleek design (right) emphasized form over function. Small-model console TVs (below right) were touted as ideal second sets for the expanding home.



Levittown resident Helen Hooper was disoriented by the parade of "milkmen, bakery men, everybody... storm-window men. Everybody trying to sell us something. I never had a house before in my life and now I had all these people: buy this, buy that, buy the other thing." This consumer-oriented way of life wasn't just inside her home. It was also outside on the lawn: "I'd never come up against crab grass in my entire life." Now, Hooper found, her husband was expected to purchase a brand-new lawn mower.

Still, the appliances that eventually became standard in Levitt homes—the General Electric refrigerator, the Bendix washing machine and the Pioneer television set—were all god-sends. Hooper credits William Levitt himself: "I was very pleased with the way he treated us, I really was. Gave us everything that, you know, we never had. Coming into a new house it was such a break because who could afford to buy a refrigerator and a washing machine and everything, when you moved in?"

To Levitt, this relationship between capitalism and the type of lifestyle his houses encouraged was the natural order of things, even patriotic. "No man who has a house and lot can be a Communist," he once told *Harper's* magazine. "He has too much to do." And, apparently, too much to buy.

J.R.



## The Dream Broker

William Levitt's life was filled with contradictions: the builder who opened home ownership to the working class, yet who himself lived in a palatial mansion on Long Island's North Shore; an enormous business talent who nonetheless made costly financial miscalculations; and a man known for arrogance who also championed many charities. A "brash, rambunctious hustler," *Time* magazine called him. A "seller of the American dream," said *The New York Times*.

Levitt was born in 1907 and raised in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, the grandson of a rabbi and the son of a real estate lawyer. While he was still struggling through classes at New York University, his father, Abraham,

acquired property in nearby Nassau County, Long Island, where real estate fortunes were made in the days of *The Great Gatsby*. Abraham Levitt founded Levitt & Sons Inc. on the eve of the

Great Depression, and appointed William president and son Alfred vice president, chief architect and planner. Such timing would have killed most ventures, but the Levitts prevailed by selling to upper-middle-class New Yorkers who could still afford new homes. By World War II, Levitt & Sons was a leading builder in the greater New York metropolitan area.

Before William left for the navy in 1943, the family firm bought the "seed plot" for Levittown: 200 acres of Long Island farmland. While Lieutenant Levitt was in

Hawaii, overseeing a Seabees construction unit, the firm continued to buy up land.

Levitt returned to the family business in 1945 with new verve and energy. Parcel by parcel, he bought more than 6,000 acres of land for Levittown. Begun in 1947, Levittown was a construction miracle, but it only succeeded through a brilliant marketing strategy, which he managed. The Levittown publicity machine included newspaper and magazine articles, radio and television appearances, and the simple repeated mantra that low price didn't cancel high value. "\$52 a Month, For Veterans Only!" shouted one early ad, which touted the houses' new appliances plus little extras such as "Venetian blinds throughout."

Levitt homes soon became a brand, like A&P supermarkets (a comparison the builder himself made). After splitting the business with Alfred in 1954, Levitt went on to build more than 100,000 houses worldwide in the next three decades.

Levitt lost most of his fortune after the disastrous sale of his business to ITT in 1968, plus failed ventures in Venezuela, Iran and Florida. Always a lightning rod for controversy—over his outspokenness, his decision not to sell Levitt houses to African Americans and the mind-numbing uniformity of his communities—Levitt observed at the end of his life that "the people of Levittown are much more my friends than the people of Park Avenue."

The millionaire died in 1994 having lost everything except pride in the accomplishment that had made him famous.

J.R.

customers] attitude, not ours," he once wrote. "As a company our position is simply this: 'We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two.'"

Even after the 1948 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Shelley v. Kraemer* made racial covenants unconstitutional, the FHA continued to underwrite loans only to white neighborhoods. Although Levitt dropped the restrictive language from his leases, he kept up the policy in practice and fought the court's ruling for years afterward. "The elimination of the clause has changed absolutely nothing," he announced in the *Levittown Tribune* in 1949. In 1958, a lawsuit charging discrimination was brought against Levitt in New Jersey, where his third planned community, Willingboro, was being built. In 1960, to avoid public hearings on the case, he agreed to desegregate Willingboro, though the sale of homes to blacks was highly orchestrated. Racial covenants were not specifically criminalized until the Civil Rights' Fair Housing Act of 1968.

At least some of the incoming white residents were uncomfortable with the restrictions. Betty Spector, who had lived in an interracial neighborhood in Washington Heights, N.Y., remembered thinking, "My God, I've moved to Bigot Town!" Spector found the lack of diversity appalling, and she was hardly the only one. As early as 1947, a committee to end discrimination was formed in the community and such efforts, while failing to change William Levitt's policies, continued well into the 1950s. Gertrude Novik, a renter who faced eviction in 1950 because she had begun an interracial play group, recalled, "We really had no place to live.... Sometimes your hands are tied, and you hope you can get in and change the world a little bit."

Eugene Burnett, a young black ex-GI, and his wife Bernice drove out to Levittown in 1950, unaware of the ban on African Americans. "It's not me, but the owners of this development have not yet decided to sell to Negroes," said the salesman. Burnett eventually moved his family to the Suffolk County suburbs and became a police officer and small businessman. Like many black professionals, he chose a racially mixed community, Ronek Park, in Amityville, which was advertised especially to people who had been turned away from Levittown. Still, for Burnett, the sting of the blow stayed with him. "I think that William Levitt and Levittown had an opportunity to do something here. In fact, not only an opportunity but a responsibility," he said some 50 years later.

Burnett's experience can be contrasted with that of Thurston Gaines, a young black doctor who moved to the community in 1955 (shortly after the racial covenants were rescinded) and lived there until about 1961. Gaines, a former Tuskegee Airman, actually worked on Levitt homes one summer after the war. Wanting a place closer to his residency, Gaines jumped at the offer of a former white classmate willing to sell his Levittown home for \$8,500. Unhappy neighbors offered more money to keep Gaines out, but the transaction went through. "We never became close with the neighbors," he said, "but we were also not interested in socializing."



William Levitt

A busy young doctor, Gaines found Levittown more a place to sleep than anything else, although two of his children were born there. By 1961 he had moved his family to Rockville Centre, a higher echelon economically than Levittown. To this day, Levittown's black population remains below 1 percent, but the Gaines' story also speaks to another trend. Like many other Levittown residents who were moving to more affluent parts of Long Island, the Gaineses were trading up.

Writer Michael Pollan remembered that "by 1960, when my parents went house hunting...Levittown was passé, and the next new place—the un-Levittown—promised to be the Gates of Woodbury, where lots were generally a sprawling acre." Like minor league ballplayers hitting the big time, some Levittown residents were jumping to the next level by the late 1950s, finding bigger homes in swankier new developments. Plainview, Huntington and other places along the new Long Island Expressway grew exponentially. Some moved east to other Levitt developments in Suffolk County, the Strathmores of Stony Brook and Coram, by the mid-1960s.

**D**riving through Levittown today on its miracle mile Hempstead Turnpike, you'd be forgiven for missing history's mark. Passing the big-box retailers and local operations like the Tri County Flea Market, which claims to hold "the largest selection of jewelry anywhere," you feel in fact you could be anywhere. You will search in vain for that original, untouched Levitt house. These days, Home Depot has taken the reins of local home improvements, and you'll find everything from Moroccan-inspired columns to a full three-story faux Mount Vernon.

The Levittown dream still exists but in much altered form. Skyrocketing real estate prices and some of the highest property taxes in the nation have pushed many out. By 1967 the basic Levitt home was valued at more than twice its original purchase price, and improved houses had almost tripled in value. Then came the go-go real estate climate of the past two decades. Levitt homes originally priced at \$7,900 were selling for well over \$400,000 by 2007.

Dorothy and Fred Johs, residents since September 1948, often marvel at the changes. Originally "we were all in the same boat, nobody had a lot of money," said Dorothy, a nurse during World War II who had met her future husband while serving in Europe. "When we moved out here, we used orange crates for end tables until we could afford to buy end tables." When they purchased the home they had been renting for six years in 1954, a \$400 loan from a neighbor gave them just enough for the \$1,000 down payment. "It was such a different time," said Fred. Over the years, the couple has seen most of their old friends and neighbors move away.

Levittown Movers started its business in the 1950s, trucking young couples and their possessions to the suburbs. But these days, the company's trucks have been headed out of town. "We're seeing an increase, not only the retirees but also families and



Potential homeowners line up to apply for the first Levittown homes in 1947. The demand was so great that the Levitts built more than 17,000 houses on Long Island by 1951.

younger people, moving to South Jersey, upstate New York, Pennsylvania and Florida," said company president Sal Randozzo. "They get job offers, and the bottom line, when they do the math, is it's cheaper to move out, even with no pay increase...to a bigger house," he said.

Still, on its 60th anniversary, Levittown holds a place on the national stage. In popular history books such as the late newsman Peter Jennings' *The Century*, it shares the American postwar memory landscape with the Berlin Airlift, the Korean War and John F. Kennedy's inauguration speech. Television personality Bill O'Reilly frequently mentions his upbringing there to burnish his common-man image. The story is familiar and understandably nostalgic: Few early residents remain; all are getting on in years. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren now struggle to enter a very different housing market.

And as early American postwar suburbs everywhere "grow to maturity," it's an episode worth remembering. Like the early residents still living there, the country has moved on, but the lessons—the importance of large-scale federal housing support, the painful, awful mistakes of racial exclusion and the fulfillment of a dream for working-class people—are still there for us, beneath all those new brick facades and layers of paint. □