

Levittown experiment

[Life](#), [Home](#)



Levittown project was taken up in the U. S. after the end of Second World War, with the aim of providing mass housing facilities to people in the wake of increasing urbanization and problems of accommodating large population in limited urban area (Friedman. 1995). The first of Levittown apartments were constructed on Long Island, New York and they symbolized the modern trends of urbanization and housing developments (Clapson. 2003). This paper shall study the impact of Levittown project on trends of further urbanization and analyze the aesthetics of design and development involved in it.

American urban housing system was not in a very good state at the end of Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers had started to return back to the mainland, filled with the dream of better and improved life (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000). Euphoric and buoyed by a hard fought and historic win, where U. S had established its military supremacy in the world, these people had great dreams and aspirations to continue in the legacy of that supremacy. This aspiration manifested itself most prominently in their demand for housing infrastructure, built with modern age planning, design, and latest infrastructure: houses that could symbolize U. S's great power stature and their own triumph in being a part of this transition.

Meanwhile the Congress announced special housing loans for returning war veterans where they could get loans on zero down-payment and little mortgage. Suddenly there was a great boom in the demand of urban housing, compared to which the available apartments fell drastically short (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000). Millions of war veterans and citizens were homeless or living in makeshift houses looking expectedly upon government

to provide them with affordable houses (Jackson. 1985). However, the strong private construction lobby was pressuring Congress to get out of the housing business, but the past record of private housing industry was patchy and they were not expected to live up to demand of providing millions of houses on affordable prices in a quick time (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000; Clapson. 2003).

Abraham Levitt, a prominent builder, understood the importance of providing housing to people of every income range and he responded to the situation by constructing rows of identical four room apartments at Long Island, New York, that were offered to veteran war soldiers for only \$60 a month (Jackson. 1985; Clapson. 2003). Levittown, the mass housing facility designed and constructed by Levitts, was vehemently criticized by architects for producing homogenous and suffocating environment and being antithetical to lofted architectural principles (Jackson. 1985).

But the critics ignored the fact that, Levitt could not incorporate the lofty and stylist architectural designs that were hallmark of most of Victorian style villas and bungalows and yet produce houses on mass scale, in quick time and provide them for sale at most affordable prices. His aim was to construct the best houses at least cost to provide most economical housing. The fact was that Levitt had successfully fulfilled the demands and dreams of many Americans of owning their own house.

Debate, Design and Impact of Levittown

To fully appreciate the significance of Levittown, it must be seen in context of the great housing demand of the period 1945-46, the intense effort of private construction giants to force the government to abandon its idea of affordable and mass housing which could seriously jeopardize the corporate game plan of selling expensive houses and flats (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000). There was intense public debate in U. S. around the issue and the corporate construction house tried to discredit mass scale housing by comparing it to slums and hotbed of communism and crime (Jackson. 1985).

Despite the well organized and orchestrated campaign against mass housing, public opinion did not waver much, and the expectations for large scale affordable housing remained a public issue (Baxandall and Ewen, 2000). People required housing, and they expected it was their right to get a decent home. High architectural designs and lofted aesthetics meant nothing to them if they resulted in homes that they could look, admire, but could not own.

Against this real challenge, Levitt and Sons took upon themselves to meet the affordable housing demand by assuming equally pragmatic approach. Levitt used special techniques and architectural designs to keep the cost of production at lowest and speed of construction at maximum. He divided entire construction procedure of houses in 26 separate steps that required professional prefabricated components.

This approach greatly reduced the construction time. Many of the building components such as nails, concrete blocks, lumber and electrical appliances were procured by Levitt and sons themselves, further minimizing the cost

(Friedman. 1995). The method of Levitt was so successful that by 1949 the first 2000 planned houses by Levitt were ready to be sold and occupied .. The first of Levitt apartment constructed on Long Island came to be known as Levittown and although they were described as drab, unimaginative and common by critics, they served their purpose of providing millions of American with their own house (Friedman. 1995).

Alfred Levitt recognized his own achievement in describing himself as Henry Ford of American housing industry, where he was producing houses at assembly line speed (Friedman. 1995). Levitt also successfully warded off the criticism of his uniform Cape-Cod style of housing by mixing his next colonies with Cape-Cods, Rancher and Colonial style houses, that ranged from \$ 5500 to \$ 14500 (Jackson. 1985; Clapson. 2003). Levittown were constructed in New Jersey and Pennsylvania as well, with equal success and revolutionizing effect on community living and development. Although attempts were made to associate them with low class life, and blandness of taste, as the houses took the character of their owners who modified and transformed them, each of them emerged as a singular entity that was precious to their owner.

Conclusion

The impact of Levitt's design had far reaching effect on construction and design of further mass scale housing projects not only in U. S but in other countries as well. Levitt's designing innovation and successful efforts to construct affordable housing had given millions of not so well-to-do

Americans their first opportunity of realizing a dream, secure their present, and lay the groundwork of building a strong future.

Reference

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