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Retrofitting “Levittown”

June Williamson



In 1947 Abraham Levitt, with sons Alfred and William, set out to build a planned new community on 4,000 acres in the town of Island Trees, New York. By refining a highly efficient, vertically integrated construction process developed before the war, Levitt and Sons rapidly constructed 17,500 houses of 750 sq.ft. each on one-eighth-acre lots. By 1951, the financial success of their original Levittown was so clear that this new model for family living was being widely copied by a new class of merchant-builders. And for the last half century, the principles of mass-production and standardization introduced by the Levitts—backed by government support for homeownership as a core political value—have remained a driving force behind the growth of the American suburbs.¹

Barber shop in DownTown Park Forest.

Despite its spectacular commercial success, in academic circles “Levittown” soon became a trope for all that was wrong with government-subsidized suburbanization. In physical terms, it evoked bulldozed farms and forests replaced by curving streets and small, repetitive houses on “cookie-cutter” lots.² Critics used the trope as shorthand for a culture of automobile dependency and wasteful sprawl. And politically, it stood for “white flight,” real estate redlining, and racially restrictive covenants.

Some also argued that the mass development of suburban housing after World War II involved tacit cooperation between government and private interests to entice mass migration from cities (seen as hotbeds of ethnicity, non-conformance, and radical politics) into more politically and economically stabilizing settings.³ As William Levitt himself famously declared, “No man who has a house and lot



can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”⁴

In sociology and popular culture, then, the trope came to refer to demographic homogeneity and social conformance—as well as stultifying boredom, especially for women.⁵ It hardly mattered that Herbert Gans observed in his 1967 book *The Levittowners* that the sociological profile of suburbanites differed little from that of middle-class urban dwellers.⁶

In hindsight, one can now see all these characterizations had some validity. But it may be more important today to

Top: Tri-County Flea Market, formerly the Mays department store, on Hempstead Turnpike in Levittown.

Bottom: Winter view of central green and former Sears building at Willingboro Town Center.

recognize that suburban developments of the immediate postwar era are now half a century old, and much change has taken place in and around them.⁷ Indeed, there is much to indicate that “Levittown” has been undergoing a continuous process of evolution, and that significant opportunities may exist to redirect this process toward a new set of goals—one based on greater diversity, more variable density, a finer grain of uses, and improved mass transit. In the process, it may also be possible to forecast a range of issues that will soon confront newer suburbs.

It is time for another look at “Levittown.”

Three Prototypical Communities

All three “Levittowns” examined here have been the subject of intense media and academic scrutiny. One is the original Levittown on Long Island. A second is a later Levitt development in Willingboro, New Jersey—the primary subject of Gans’s book. The third is Park Forest, Illinois, whose residents provided a source for many of the observations in William Whyte’s influential 1956 book *The Organization Man*.⁸

From the outset, these places shared certain important characteristics. In contrast to typical prewar middle-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods, all were constructed extremely rapidly. In the first Levittown, the peak rate of construction was an astonishing thirty houses per day—a fact which added to its allure. As planned communities, each also came with schools, pools and parks, shopping centers, and other amenities.⁹

The demographic profiles of their original residents were also largely similar. These were young, white families with one primary wage earner, often a returning GI, who commuted to a nearby city to work. Previously, many such families had lived in apartments in urban ethnic neighborhoods, often doubling up with relatives.¹⁰ But postwar FHA and VA mortgage programs made suburban living feasible, allowing them to purchase inexpensive houses with little money down.

What both critics and proponents agree on is that the Levitts and other merchant-builders were selling a promise of upward mobility. What has become of these places today?

The original Levittown consisted of a series of residential subdivisions clustered north and south of Hempstead Turnpike. It was served by small haphazardly developed shopping centers, and sites for schools were donated as new lands were acquired.

Today the principal trends in Levittown include rising house prices and low turnover. Two-bedroom houses, once priced at around \$7,000, now have a median assessed

value of \$190,000. Low turnover is indicated by the fact that 26 percent of the current population (53,000) moved there prior to 1969. When first sold, Levittown houses carried odious whites-only restrictive covenants. U.S. Census data from 2000 indicates that Levittown also remains overwhelmingly (94 percent) white.

Like Levittown, construction of Park Forest began in 1947. The developer, American Community Builders (ACB), had purchased 2,400 acres some 30 miles south of Chicago. The master plan was the work of Elbert Peets, coauthor of *The American Vitruvius* and a designer in the federal government's 1930s greenbelt-town program. The president of ACB, Philip M. Klutznick, also had a long government resume, including a stint as head of the Federal Public Housing Authority.

Unlike Levittown, at least a quarter of the housing units in Park Forest were rental apartments. These were organized in lowrise garden courts, grouped around an open-air shopping center. Possibly the first suburban pedestrian mall, the shopping area included a Piazza San Marco-style clock tower that became a primary meeting point.¹¹ Park Forest also included a forest preserve and a large park, ideas drawn from the idealistic greenbelt program.

Today Park Forest's population has dwindled to 23,500 from a high of 33,000 in the 1960s. According to the 2000 Census, 55 percent of residents are white and 39 percent are African American. The average value of owner-occupied houses is \$85,400—relatively low in regional terms.¹² Likewise, although levels of educational attainment are identical, the median household income is 30 percent lower than in Levittown, with almost double the number of female-headed and nonfamily households. The presence of a large number of affordable rental units may account for this difference.

Willingboro was built by the Levitt Company a decade later, between Camden and Trenton—with the first families, including that of Herbert Gans, moving in in 1958. It, too, was originally named Levittown; but to distinguish it from another nearby Levittown in Pennsylvania, residents voted in 1963 to revert to the original town name.

The company had made several important changes in its planning approach since its earlier projects. One was to redraw local political boundaries so that the entire community would fit within a single township. Another was to concentrate shopping in a single 600,000-sq.-ft. outdoor pedestrian mall. To accommodate growing families without the need for remodeling, Willingboro houses were also designed with three or four bedrooms, and ranged in price from \$11,500 to \$14,500. finally, the site was more sensi-



tively and professionally planned with respect to issues such as drainage and wayfinding.¹³

The most significant evolutionary change in Willingboro today may be its racial composition. Some 67 percent of its 33,000 residents are African American, 6 percent are Hispanic, and only 23 percent are white. Levitt had originally intended to exclude minority residents, a practice the company defended on economic grounds. But legal pressure forced it to integrate Willingboro. A consultant was even hired to prevent the clustering of minority buyers.¹⁴

Top: Aerial view of Park Forest Plaza, 1950s. Photograph courtesy of the Park Forest Public Library.

Bottom: Recent aerial view of DownTown Park Forest, with new drugstore and senior housing in foreground. Photograph courtesy of Warren Skalski, Village of Park Forest.

Today, town and county officials attribute Willingboro's relatively low median house value—\$96,700—to its reputation as a “black” suburb. Even though educational levels and median household income are similar, and its houses are generally bigger and sited on larger lots, this figure is half the value of houses in Levittown.

The above review indicates how the character of original “Levittowns” may have diverged significantly over the years. But in one important respect—aging—they have remained remarkably similar.

Typical of postwar conditions, the median age of Park Forest's first residents was 28, and two-thirds of its household heads were veterans. Today, the median age in all three communities has risen to 35–38, and one quarter of households include at least one senior.

Resistance to Change in Residential Patterns

In physical terms, perhaps the most remarkable similarity between the three “Levittowns” today is the extent to which their original residential patterns have resisted change. Neighborhood streets are unaltered; lots have not been combined or further subdivided; single-family houses have not been replaced with multifamily dwellings; and individual dwellings have not been demolished or changed to other uses.

Clearly, the high rate of owner occupancy is an important factor contributing to the lack of change. Since the 1950s, homeownership has been supported by government mortgage guarantees and tax policy as a means of building personal wealth. As Barbara Kelly has noted, most Levittown homeowners have also used sweat equity to increase the value and utility of their houses through remodeling.¹⁵

As Renee Chow recounts in her article in this issue (and elsewhere¹⁶) regulations on such variables as setbacks and the number of units on a lot have also worked against change. But even if original codes had allowed more variety, it would have been nearly impossible politically for developers to purchase and assemble small, contiguous lots from owner-occupants and convert them to other uses—or even other forms of housing.

On account of this inflexibility, however, the lack of housing options has now become a concern in all three communities. This is especially true for single people and among seniors who wish to downsize without leaving the area. Almost fully “built out,” there seem to be no other way to address this concern than by retrofitting formerly nonresidential sites.

In Willingboro, such efforts have included construction of three-story townhouses on reclaimed portions of the

mall parking lot. Assisted-living apartments—the town's first midrise dwellings—were also recently built on another commercial parcel along Route 130; and the township is trying to encourage the mixed-use redevelopment of another site—a closed marina.¹⁷

In Levittown, townhouses for seniors were recently constructed on formerly commercial land, and much of the commercial “strip” along Hempstead Turnpike may be ripe for similar retrofitting.

Park Forest, as previously noted, included many garden apartments when first constructed. Nevertheless, dedicated senior housing is a pressing need, and an assisted-living facility was recently constructed on the site of the old Sears store.

Failure and Redevelopment of Retail Properties

While residential neighborhoods in postwar “Levittowns” have resisted physical transformation, their retail areas have not. As the articles by Ellen Dunham-Jones and Michael Freedman in this issue make clear, retail competition is relentless, and the cycle of renewal or demise is short.

Retail activity in Levittown was originally confined to Hempstead Turnpike, which both bifurcated the community and connected it to neighboring towns. Commercial outlets there included small malls, restaurants, and eventually a Mays department store. Today, while house values remain strong, the rents on this strip are low, and the Mays building is used primarily for a flea market. Many of these sites are ripe for retrofitting, perhaps into residential or other nonretail uses.

Unlike Levittown's ad-hoc commercial areas, Park Forest's innovative 48-acre outdoor mall was designed by the prominent architecture firm of Loeb, Schlossman, and Bennett. The centralized complex of shops, recreational activities and offices, ringed with free parking, was anchored by Marshall Field, Goldblatt's, and Sears. It quickly became the social heart of the town, the setting for parades, political rallies, and other community events.

Yet despite a mid-1980s overhaul, by 1995 the Park Forest Plaza was effectively dead. The real estate diagnosis was poor location: since it was built in the center of the community, far from any arterial boulevard, it did not benefit from a larger catchment of shoppers. Eventually, many residents also chose to shop at newer, copycat malls, some developed by Klutznick himself.¹⁸

Much effort has gone into considering how Park Forest Plaza might be retrofitted. With no outside developer interested, the Village of Park Forest eventually purchased the site for a meager \$100,000. Its redevelopment has since involved demolition of some buildings and construction of

new streets through its pedestrian areas. Nevertheless, the award-winning “Down Town Park Forest” is today spottily tenanted and somewhat forlorn, and development of its planned residential pieces is progressing slowly. With time, this place may regain vitality, but only because the Village of Park Forest is operating under a different financing model and with different goals than a commercial developer.¹⁹

The township of Willingboro has similarly committed significant public resources to redeveloping its original mall. When Interstate 295 was built in the 1970s displacing Route 130 in regional importance, Willingboro Plaza suffered a similar fate as Park Forest Plaza (which it was, in part, modeled on).

However, with \$14 million in financing from the township, a progressive developer, Renewal Realty, is now transforming the 56-acre site into a mixed-use “town center.” So far this boasts a new public library, classrooms for a local community college, and a mail-order center for a pharmaceutical company.

Although this last building is decidedly unfriendly to pedestrians, it has brought 850 jobs, and townhouses are being added along the rear of the site.²⁰ Overall, the project presents an innovative mix of conventional stand-alone suburban types—office park, fast-food outlets, community college, and multifamily housing. Local officials, though, continue to believe their efforts to attract national retailers are being stymied by aversion to the township’s racial profile.²¹

No doubt, the involvement of town governments and the introduction of mixed uses does represent an important new model for transforming such bypassed suburban retail properties. But these projects face an uphill battle. Builders once provided such shopping areas to boost the attractiveness of their residential developments. Today the obsolescence of these commercial areas is also detracting from the value of residences in all three communities

Paths toward Change

What is the future of these original “Levittowns”? Should they still be regarded simply as bedroom communities? Are their schools and retail areas still viable? Can they be retrofitted to broaden the qualities of life they afford?

Such questions are particularly pertinent on Long Island, where the diversification of housing types will be critical in coming years. A recent survey showed a 20 percent decrease in the number of 18-to-34-year-olds in Nassau and Suffolk Counties from 1990 to 2000. Some of the main reasons given were scarce and overpriced housing and the cost of owning and fueling a vehicle.²²

Such studies indicate that one of the greatest hindrances

to redefining the place of “Levittown” today is the limited range of uses for which it was originally built. Nevertheless, significant opportunities do exist. It will be possible to better integrate workplaces into these settings, including support for working at home. The development of better transit options will also be important, particularly if town-center initiatives such as those of Willingboro and Forest Park are to succeed.

The viability of schools and other community facilities is another important consideration. In 1983 Levittown Memorial High School closed due to declining enrollment, and was converted into an adult- and special-education headquarters.²³ One of two high schools in Willingboro was also closed around the same time, but it may now be transformed into a performing-arts center. Schools were once central to the social life of every “Levittown,” and their closure has left a hole at the heart of each community that clearly needs to be filled.

A third significant concern is a lack of space for civic life such as that which Park Forest Plaza once allowed. Fortunately, suburban governments today seem to understand that retrofitting “Levittowns” should involve bolstering public spaces and institutions. However, to ensure the viability of such new centers, regional associations may need to be invented to improve their functioning and accessibility.²⁴

Finally, it is important that planners address the continuing environmental impact of suburban development. Many of “Levittown’s” now-ailing shopping areas were built on wetland sites. Where these are unsuitable for conversion to housing, the opportunity may exist to reclaim them for bioremediation, wildlife habitat, or parkland.

Where is “Levittown” today? These snapshots have revealed that even in such mythologically “frozen-in-time” places, evolution does occur. The changes are diverse and uneven, but several general conclusions may be drawn:

- These communities are almost completely built out. Any new development, especially for multifamily housing, must come from redevelopment, especially of underutilized school and commercial parcels.
- The aggregation of single-family house sites is not likely to happen—and may not even be desirable. The legalization and encouragement of accessory units may, however, allow greater housing choice.
- Median age has risen significantly, and a greater range of housing options is needed. This must include senior apartments and assisted-living facilities with convenient access to transit, social opportunities, and recreational space.
- Retail parcels are failing, creating blight and a significant loss of tax revenue. With private developers unwilling or

unable to address the problem, local governments may need to step in and pursue innovative strategies for retrofitting.

- Bias is still attached to demographic diversity. Where minority residents, especially African Americans, represent a significant percentage of the population, property values are lower than places with comparable household income, education level, and housing stock.

- Regional alliances may need to be formed to address issues of shared concern like strip retrofitting and mass transit. Expanded transit options could help revive mixed-use centers by improving accessibility.

In many ways the original “Levittowns” served as a template for the last half century of suburban development. Today, in addition to solving local problems, a campaign of intelligent retrofits in these places may also provide useful models for retrofitting the thousands of similar developments that rolled off the assembly lines after them.

Notes

1. See Barry Checkoway, “Large Builders, Federal Housing Programmes, and Post-war Suburbanization,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1980), pp. 21-44.
2. For a full account, see Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
3. Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), pp. 193-214, 240-61; and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 190-218.
4. Quoted in Eric Larrabee, “The Six Thousand Houses that Levitt Built,” *Harper's*, September 1948, p. 84.
5. See Betty Friedan’s discussion of “the problem that has no name” in *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Laurel Books, 1984; original 1963), pp. 15-32.
6. Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982; original, 1967).
7. Paul H. Mattingly, “The Suburban Canon over Time,” in Peter Land and Tam Miller, eds., *Suburban Discipline* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), pp. 39-51.
8. William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).
9. Marc Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 2.
10. Richard Sherman, “Park Forest: A Model for U.S. Planned Towns,” *Star Newspapers*, Sept. 11, 1988.
11. A commuter-rail station was planned at the mall, but the Chicago commuter-rail authority never built it. See Gregory Randall, *America’s Original G.I. Town: Park Forest, Illinois* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 73.
12. For comparative statistics on Park Forest and other suburbs, see William H. Hudnut III, *Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America’s first-Tier Suburbs* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 2003).
13. Gans, *The Levittowners*, pp. 5-12.
14. This was eventually accomplished by offering African-American families the choicest lots at the edges of the neighborhood, and then allowing white buyers to move in next door or in a less desirable central location. See “Living Together: How One Suburb Acted to Integrate Smoothly, Avoid Major Incidents,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 1970; and Gans, *The Levittowners*, pp. 375-80.
15. Barbara M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 104-18.
16. Renee Chow, *Suburban Space: The Fabric of Dwelling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
17. Denise Rose, *Willingboro Township Manager*, personal interview, January 18, 2005.
18. Randall, *America’s Original G.I. Town*, pp. 140-56.
19. Lee Sobel with Ellen Greenberg and Steven Bodzin, *Greyfields into Goldfields* (San Francisco: Congress for the New Urbanism, 2002), pp. 68-69; and Christopher Swope, “After the Mall,” *Governing*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (October, 2002), pp. 20-24.
20. Dennis Hevesi, “Antidotes to Sprawl Taking Many Forms,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2003. See also David Smiley, ed., *Sprawl and Public Space: Redressing the Mall* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002).
21. J.R. Reid, *Burlington County Planner*, and Denise Rose, *Willingboro Township Manager*, personal interviews, January 18, 2005.
22. Compared with a 4 percent decrease nationwide, and no decrease in New York City. See Patrick Healy, “Young Adults Call L.I. a fine Place to Grow Up, and Leave,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2004.
23. James Barron, “A Classic Suburb Feels Graying Pains,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1983.
24. Myron Orfield, *American Metropolis: The New Suburban Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

