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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 as William Levitt himself famously declared, “No man who has a house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”

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. 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.

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

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.

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. 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?

Tonight the principal trends in Levittown include rising assessed values—have remained a driving force behind the growth of the American suburbs.

Barber shop in Down Town Park Forest.

Despite it 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. 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, nonconformity, and radical politics) into more politically and economically stabilizing settings. As William Levitt himself declared, “No man who has a house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”

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Today the principal trends in Levittown include rising prices of housing and land. Traditional Levittown lots—once priced at around $7,000, now have a median assessed value—have remained a driving force behind the growth of the American suburbs.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.”

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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 process and low turnover. Two-bedroom houses, once priced at around $7,000, now have a median assessed price.
value of $190,000. Low turnover is indicated by the fact that 76 percent of the current population (73,000) moved there prior to 1965. When first sold, Levittown houses carried tidy 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 Vitruvian* 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. 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 $84,400—relatively low in regional terms. Likewise, although levels of educational attainment are identical, the median household income is $10 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 sensitively and professionally planned with respect to issues such as drainage and wayfinding. 

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. 

Today, town and county officials attribute Willingboro’s slow growth to 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 51-58, and one quarter of households include at least one senior.

Resistence 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. As Renee Chow recounts in her article in this issue (and elsewhere) 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 development—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. 

In Levittown, amenities for seniors were recently constructed on formerly commercial land, and much of the commercial “strip” along Hampstead 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 Hampstead 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 architects firm of Loebl, 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.

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 $500,000. Its redevelopment has since involved demolition of some buildings and construction of
value of $190,000. Low turnout is indicated by the fact that 26 percent of the current population (73,000) moved there prior to 1969. When first sold, Levittown houses carriedidious whites-only restrictive covenants. U.S. Census data from 2000 indicates that Levittown also remains overwhelmingly (94 percent) white.

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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. 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 21,500 from a high of 35,000 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 $86,400—relatively low in regional terms. 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.

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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 60-acre 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 sensibly and professionally planned with respect to issues such as drainage and wayfinding.

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Typical of postwar conditions, the median age of Park Forest’s first residents was 28, and two-thirds of its households were veterans. Today, the median age in all three communities has risen to 53-54, and one quarter of households include at least one senior.

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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 Skalnik, Village of Park Forest.

48 Appointment of Places

49 Speaking of Places
new streets through its pedestrian areas. Nevertheless, the award-winning “DownTown Park Forest” is today spot-
tilly tenanted and somewhat forlorn, and development of its planned residential pieces is progressing slowly. With time,

ty, suburban governments today seem to understand that retrofitting “Levittowns” should involve bolstering public spaces and institutions. However, to ensure the viability
ty of such new centers, regional associations may need to be invented to improve their functioning and accessibility.

Finally, it is important that planners address the continu-
ing environmental impact of suburban development. Many of “Levittown’s” now-ailing shopping areas were

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 home sites is not likely to happen—and may not even be desirable. The legaliza-
tion 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 apart-
ments 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 revitalize mixed-use centers by improving accessibility.

In many ways the original “Levittowns” served as a tem-
rplate 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 develop-
ments that rolled off the assembly lines after them.

**Notes**

1. See Barry Cherkovney, “Large Builders, Fiduciary Housing Program, and Post-


5. See Barry Friedman’s discussion of “the problem that has no name” in The Invisible Minorites (New York: Laurel Books, 1984, original 1976), pp. 13–22.


11. A commuter-rail station was planned at the mall, but the Chicago commuter-

12. This was eventually accomplished by offering African-American families the choice to locate at the edges of the neighborhood, and then allowing white buyers to move in down the street or in a less desirable central location. See “Living Together: How One Suburb Acted to Integrate Smoothly,” Wall Street Jour-

13. Barbara M. Kelly, Expanding the American Dream: Building and Redeveloping Levit-


17. Denise Rose, Burlington County Planner, and Donna Rose, Willingboro Township Man-


19. Compared with a 4 percent decrease nationwide, and no decrease in New York
City. See Patrick Hardy, “Young Adults Call L.I. a Two-Parade Place to Grow Up and


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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 Willington has similarly committed significant public resources to redeveloping its original mall. When Interstate 295 was built in the 1970s displac
ing Route 130 in regional importance, Willington 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 52-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 pharma
caceutical 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

On the other hand, 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 continue to believe their efforts to attract national retailers are not paying off, and the cost of owning and fueling a vehicle.22

Many of “Levittown’s” now-ailing shopping areas were built on wetland sites. Where these are unsuitable for con
struction, 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.

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Notes
1. See Barry Chapman, “Large Builders, Federal Housing Programmes, and Post
war Suburbanization,” International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Vol. 4
No. 1 (March 1990), pp. 13-45.
versity Press, 1985), pp. 120-128.
5. See Barry Friedman’s discussion of “the problem that has no name” in The Feminine Mystique (New York: Laurel Books, 1984, original 1953), pp. 121-32.
11. A commuter rail station was planned at the mall, but the Chicago commuter
12. For comparative statistics on Park Forest and other suburbs, see William H. Hudna III, Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America’s First-Tier Suburbs (Washin
14. This was eventually accomplished by offering African-American families the
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15. Barbara M. Kelly, Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levit
16. Rene Cooper, Suburban Space: The Fabric of Shopping (Berkeley and Los Angeles:
University of California Press, 2002).
21. J.R. Reid, Burlington County Planner, and Donna Rose, Willington Town Center
24. Myron Orfield, American Metropolis: The New Suburban Reality (Washin