REDESIGNING THE AMERICAN DREAM
Gender, Housing, and Family Life

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$12.00
Mired in spring mud, striped with the treads of bulldozers, Vanport City, Oregon, is a new town under construction. Concrete trucks pour foundations and give way to flatbed trucks that deliver cedar siding from the forests of the Northwest. Carpenters, plumbers, and electricians try to stay out of each other’s way as they work evenings, Saturdays, and Sundays. Architects from the firm of Wolff and Phillips confer on the site six, ten, a dozen times a day. “All my life I have wanted to build a new town,” the project architect confides to a reporter, “but—not this fast. We hardly have time to print the working drawings before the buildings are out of the ground.”

Near the town site, steel deliveries arrive at several shipyards on the
Columbia River, where production is geared to an even more frenetic pace. The yards are open twenty-four hours a day. Cranes move against the sky, shifting materials. Tired workers pour out of the gates at 8 a.m., 4 p.m., and midnight, each shift replaced by fresh arrivals—women and men in coveralls who carry protective goggles and headgear. The personnel office is recruiting as far away as New York and Los Angeles. They want welders, riveters, and electricians. They offer on-the-job training, housing, child care, and fringe benefits. They also advertise for maintenance workers, nursery school teachers, elementary school teachers, and nurses. In ten months, the personnel office does enough hiring to populate a new town of forty thousand people—white, African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic workers and their families. This is the first time that an integrated, publicly subsidized new town of this type has ever been built in the United States.

The chief engineer from the Federal Public Housing Authority is checking the last of the construction details as the residents’ cars, pickup trucks, and moving vans start to arrive. It has been ten months from schematic designs to occupancy. The project architect is exhausted. Never has he had a more demanding design program to meet, never a more impossible timetable. He has had to rethink many basic questions in very little time and reexamine every idea he has ever had about normal family life, about men, women, and children. The program specified that he design affordable housing for all types and sizes of households, including single people, single-parent families, and nonfamily groups. He also had to make the best use of scarce building materials and energy resources. He was directed to emphasize public transportation by bus. His housing also had to be positioned in relation to several child-care centers and job sites: “On a straight line,” said James L. Hymes, the client in charge of child care, because he did not want parents to have to make long journeys to drop off or pick up their children.

“They certainly should become famous for that,” the architect asserts, considering the six large child-care centers, open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (just like the shipyards), complete with infirmaries for sick children, child-sized bathtubs so that mothers do not need to bathe children at home, cooked food services so that mothers can pick up hot casseroles along with their
children, and, most important of all, large windows with views of the river, so that children can watch the launchings at the yards. “There goes mommy’s ship!” said one excited five-year-old. It all seems to work very well. And it costs seventy-five cents per day for the first child and fifty cents for each additional child. Kaiser has also built several kindergartens, five grade schools, and seventeen supervised playgrounds to serve nine thousand children.

It is March, 1943. Vanport City, a product of World War II, is nicknamed Kaiserville after the industrialist who owns the shipyards. Everywhere at home and abroad, Americans are singing a song at the top of the wartime hit parade:

- All the day long whether rain or shine,
- She’s a part of the assembly line . . .
- She’s making history, working for victory,
- Rosie the Riveter!

This amazing American woman has been the client as much as Henry J. Kaiser, who has built this town for Rosie the Riveter and her children. The director of the child-care project, James Hymes, notes that, “In the past, good nursery schools have been a luxury for the wealthy. The Kaiser Child Service Centers are among the first places where working people, people of average means, have been able to afford good nursery education for their children.” The range of services offered to mothers by an American employer is unprecedented. So are wartime profits. Henry J. Kaiser and his management team link their economic success to their concern for women’s labor power. “The way people live and the way their families are cared for is bound to be reflected in production,” says one Kaiser official.¹

Six years later, another new town for seventy-five thousand people is being built at the same frantic pace near Hempstead, Long Island. In Levittown, nothing is on a straight line. Roads curve to lead the eye around the corner, but every road is lined with identical houses. There is no industry here except the construction industry. Each new Cape Cod house is designed to be a self-contained world, with white picket fence, green lawn, living room with television set built into the wall, kitchen with Bendix washing machine built into the laundry alcove. Every family is expected to consist of male breadwinner, female housewife, and their children. Energy conservation is not a design issue, nor is low maintenance,
1.1 Women working as riveters and welders, 1944.

1.2 Wolff and Phillips, architects, plan for one of the day care centers at Vanport City, Oregon, 1944. Wartime services for workers who were also parents were excellent at the Kaiser shipyards.
nor is public transportation, nor is child care. A few parks and public swimming pools are planned to provide recreation.

In March, 1949, the developer is ready to sell his houses. On a Wednesday, the first prospective buyers camp out in front of the sales office that will open the following Monday. It is the end of winter on Long Island, raw, wet, and cold. One of the women on the line of buyers is pregnant. The developer’s assistant rushes her to the hospital so she does not have her baby in the street. He returns and sets up a canteen for hot coffee and hot soup. News photographers come by and take pictures. On Monday night, in three and a half hours, the developer sells $11 million worth of identical two-bedroom houses. His company emerges as one of the great business successes of the postwar era. His Cape Cod house becomes the single most powerful symbol of the dream of upward mobility and home ownership for American families. Because of mortgage subsidies and tax deductions for home owners, it is cheaper to buy a house in Levittown than to rent an apartment in New York City.²

The promoter of this new town, William J. Levitt, acknowledges that Levittown is not integrated. He explains to a reporter that this is “not a matter of prejudice, but one of business. As a Jew, I have no room in my mind or heart for racial prejudice. But, by various means, I have come to know that if we sell one house to a Negro family, then 90 to 95 percent of our white customers will not buy into the community.”³ In fact, the Federal Housing Administration does not, at this time, approve mortgage funds for integrated communities, or mortgages for female-headed families.⁴ The prospective customers do not get a chance to make this choice for themselves.

This second new town—Levittown—becomes known all over the world as a model of American know-how just as the first new town—Vanport City—is being dismantled, some of its housing taken apart piece by piece. Yet both of these ventures had great appeal as solutions to the housing needs of American families, and both made their developers a great deal of money. Vanport City met the needs of a wartime labor force, composed of women and men of many diverse racial and economic groups. The builders of Vanport City responded to the need for affordable housing, on-the-job training, and economic development for workers. They recognized that single parents and two-earner families required exten-
1.3 Postwar house with homeowner, wife, and children, Levittown, New York, 1948: This housing represents the haven strategy of building homes as retreats for male workers and as workplaces for their wives. (Bernard Hoffman, LIFE Magazine, © 1950, Time, Inc.)

1.4 Plan of a Levitt house, 1952 model.
(1) Bendix washing machine (2) water heater.

...sive child care in order to give their best energies to production. The site design and landscaping of Vanport City were good, the economic organization was good, and the social services were superb (down to maintenance crews who would fix leaky faucets or repair broken windows), but the housing lacked charm. It looked like a “housing project,” and the residents were renters, not owners. Yet it was the most ambitious attempt ever made in the United States to shape space for employed women and their families. The U.S. government supplied $26 million to build the housing. Kaiser
made only a $2 profit on it, but he made a fortune on the ships the war workers built for him.\textsuperscript{5}

Levittown provided for rather different needs than the ones met by Vanport City. Levitt's client was the returning veteran, the beribboned male war hero who wanted his wife to stay home. Women in Levittown were expected to be too busy tending their children to care about a paying job. The Cape Cod houses recalled traditional American colonial housing (although they were very awkwardly proportioned). They emphasized privacy. Large-scale plans for public space and social services were sacrificed to private yards. Although the houses were small, a husband could convert his attic and then build an addition quite easily, since the houses covered only 15 percent of the lots. Levitt liked to think of the husband as a weekend do-it-yourself builder and gardener: "No man who owns his house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do."\textsuperscript{6} Levitt aimed to shape private space for white working-class males and their dependents. The pressures of war and the communal style of military barracks made suburban privacy attractive to many veterans, especially those with new cars to go with their new houses. Levitt made his fortune on the potato farms that he subdivided with the help of federal financing from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and VA mortgages and federal highway programs to get people to remote suburbs. And as the landscaping matured, Levittown began to look better than the acres of little boxes some visitors perceived at the start.

Ironically, although Kaiser's highly praised wartime town lost the public relations battle to Levitt's postwar suburb, Kaiser himself was not a loser in this contest. He understood changing federal subsidy programs for housing, and after receiving wartime Lanham Act funds for Vanport City, which enabled him to expand his shipyards with new workers, Kaiser entered the post–World War II housing arena with new developments suited to the FHA and VA subsidies. On the West Coast, he built thousands of single-family houses in subdivisions much like Levitt's.\textsuperscript{7} "Vets! No down!" read his signs. The losers were not the housing developers but the skilled women workers who lost their wartime jobs to returning white male veterans. Most wartime employers discontinued their day-care programs immediately. The riveters became supermarket check-out clerks, maids, and cafeteria workers. Rosie the Riveter found no postwar
1.5 Clarence Stein, Robert Alexander, et al., Baldwin Hills Village, Los Angeles, 1938–1942. Baldwin Hills represents the neighborhood strategy. The one-bedroom (A), two-bedroom (C-1), and three-bedroom (D) houses were subsidized, rental units organized around shared open spaces.
housing subsidies designed to help her find a new job, a new home, or a mortgage with easy terms.

In the same era a third new town was launched, Baldwin Hills Village in Los Angeles, California. It did not make anyone a fortune, neither an industrialist like Kaiser nor a developer like Levitt. Funded by the FHA and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, its designers had sophisticated professional ambitions: to reinterpret the tradition of common land at the heart of New England’s Puritan communities; to adapt the best low-cost European public housing designs to American lifestyles; and to keep the car in its proper place for the sake of air quality, children’s safety, and open-space design.

Unlike the other two projects, the construction of the Baldwin Hills Village dragged on in the early 1940s. City engineers made complaints about the designers’ refusal to cut roads through the site. The building department did not like the great variety of apartment and townhouse layouts. The plans had to be redrawn no fewer than ten times. Budget cuts removed three child-care centers and a shopping center. Land acquisition problems canceled the second phase of the project. Clarence Stein, the overall designer, discovered that his proposal for community kitchens had not been funded.8

Yet when the project finally opened as subsidized rental housing, several of the collaborating local architects moved to Baldwin Hills Village. As a statement of support for their project, they left elegant private homes in other parts of Los Angeles to be part of the new experiment and to make sure it worked. They felt extremely pleased that they had created low-rise, medium-density housing with generous floor plans, sunlight, and lush landscaping. The cost was almost as low as that of other local public housing "projects."9 The residents enjoyed a belt of three parks running through the center of the site, as well as smaller landscaped courtyards, tot lots, and private fenced-in outdoor space for each family. There were common laundries and drying yards, common garages, and a community center with a swimming pool.

Baldwin Hills Village was integrated at the start. Within ten years many white tenants left, drawn to new opportunities for home ownership. Renter households were surrounded by homeowners living on suburban plots. Eventually a group turned the
Village into condominiums, prohibited children under eighteen, tore out the tot lots, and installed a miniature golf course on the central green. In the 1980s, the children for whom the village was designed were gone, and many of the elderly residents were too afraid of crime to use its three magnificent parks. Yet, the Baldwin Hills Village revived. Vanport City became a ghost town. Because most Lanham Act housing was designed to be temporary, part of Vanport City was dismantled after World War II. The rest was destroyed in a flood, and today the site of what was once the fifth largest city in the Northwest is a park.\textsuperscript{10}

Baldwin Hills Village and Vanport City whisper the stories of planned settlements based on complex visions of the American dream. Both sites raise broad issues in housing and urban design: the relationship of housing to jobs and social services; the need to design for diverse household types; the rights of female workers to housing and jobs; the need for both spatial privacy and spatial community; the need for the regulation of automobiles; the problem of affordability; and the question of homeownership or tenancy as it concerns the stability of residential neighborhoods. Baldwin Hills Village and Vanport City represent earlier struggles to come to terms with the social and economic programming of affordable housing. These projects, now largely forgotten, remind us that the need for affordable housing for all Americans is not a new problem, nor are the design issues and political questions that housing raises novel. What is new is a critique based on gender that suggests how gender is connected to class and race.

Very little of today’s housing follows the Vanport City model of the home as a support for women in the industrial labor force or emulates the Baldwin Hills Village model of the home as a part of a well-thought-out neighborhood. Most American housing is based on federal government policy reflected in Levitt’s design of the home as a haven for the white male worker’s family. In the late 1940s, American builders mass-produced the home as haven and transformed our urban regions to fit this model, with its particular social, economic, and environmental shortcomings. During the last six decades, government subsidized programs have concentrated the bulk of capital resources for housing on the single-family detached house. About 80 percent of the total housing stock in the United States in the year 1999 was built after 1940. With just over
100 million occupied housing units, nearly two-thirds are single-family detached homes. These houses encode Victorian stereotypes about "a woman's place," while single-family neighborhoods sustain the separation of the household from the world of jobs and public life. Together, houses and neighborhoods form an architecture of gender unsuited to twenty-first-century life.

Single-family houses have been getting larger and larger in each decade since World War II. Yet households have been getting smaller. Married-couple families with children under 18 constituted less than a quarter of all households in 2000, and most of these were two-earner families. About a third of all households consisted of one person living alone. As a result of these demographic changes, many individuals and families are now experiencing serious difficulties. Whether they plan to rent or own, many cannot locate well-designed, solidly built housing that is affordable.

The symptoms of this housing crisis begin with young couples. Even if they are both employed, often they cannot qualify for a mortgage. In 2000, the average price of existing single-family homes reached $177,000. To lower their housing costs, they must commute long distances to remote suburbs where land is cheaper. At the same time, the elderly who live on fixed incomes—even those who own their houses outright—often find they cannot meet the property taxes, heating bills, and the demands for physical maintenance of single-family homes. The frail elderly often cannot drive, a necessity in most suburban locations. Single-parent families often lack the support system required if the parent is holding a paid job. Infant care, day care, after-school care, public transportation so that older children can move about independently, closeness to stores and health services, are almost always lacking in neighborhoods where the housing was originally designed for households with a full-time housewife caring for husband and children. Two-earner couples experience many of the same strains.

Single people, male or female, old or young, straight or gay, often find that the housing options available to them lack flexibility, variety, and complexity. Coming home to an empty house or apartment every night can be dreary, but sharing traditional housing designed for the closeness of one family can be frustrating in its lack of privacy. More subtle options are hard to locate, and harder to finance.
Couples undergoing divorce or separation experience additional frustration. If two incomes are needed to support one mortgage, neither partner may be able to afford to buy the other’s share of a jointly-owned house. At the same time, it may not be feasible to relinquish one low-interest mortgage in favor of two expensive rentals. Furthermore, some landlords discourage families with children. As families struggle to cope with these dilemmas, rigid zoning laws and financing arrangements that make “granny flats” or “daughter-in-law apartments” illegal only compound the problem. It becomes clear that neighborhoods need a variety of housing types at affordable prices so that single-parent families, singles, and the elderly can live in close proximity to traditional families.

Despite fair housing legislation, segregation in neighborhoods of single-family detached houses has never been dealt with adequately. Informal discriminatory practices of realtors, homeowners, and banks resist regulation. In poor inner-city neighborhoods, banks may refuse to grant loans, despite bans on “redlining.” Public housing may create racial segregation based on poverty. Gated communities and second homes for the affluent oppose burnt-out tenements and vandalized public-housing projects at the extremes of the American housing spectrum. On the very lowest rung of the economic ladder, an estimated 2.3 to 3.5 million homeless sleep in shelters or on the street. Women, children, and men lie on the heating vents of New York skyscrapers, under the freeway overpasses in Los Angeles, and in the doorways and parks of smaller cities and towns.

The United States has a housing crisis of disturbing complexity; a crisis that, in different ways, affects rich and poor, male and female, young and old, people of color and white Americans. We have not merely a housing shortage, but a broader set of unmet needs caused by the efforts of the entire society to fit itself into a housing pattern that reflects the dreams of the mid-nineteenth century better than the realities of the twenty-first century. Single-family suburban homes have become inseparable from the American dream of economic success and upward mobility. Their presence pervades every aspect of economic, social, and political life in the United States, because the mass-production of these homes, beginning in the late 1940s, transformed the American landscape.
This book is about the search for more satisfactory patterns of housing, work, and family life in the United States, as well as in other countries where the employment of women in the paid labor force has created similar strains. The first part of the book, “The Evolution of American Housing,” looks at the history of American shelter since colonial times. It examines both rural farms and urban apartments, and documents the wide variety of housing arrangements available before the 1940s, when the suburban single-family house became the national norm. It then explores the challenges to the suburban dream house posed by environmental groups, women’s groups, and civil rights groups, as well as the threat to dream houses created by changing economic conditions.

The second part, “Rethinking Private Life,” seeks to identify the deepest needs and desires associated with the ideal of home. What are the most basic human attachments to a home, and how are they expressed in modern, urban societies? Humans need nurturing, aesthetic pleasure, and economic security. Homes can contribute to the satisfaction of these desires, or frustrate them. Three models of housing in industrial societies emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century: the haven strategy, the industrial strategy, and the neighborhood strategy. These models carried different implications for nurturing, aesthetic expression, and economic development. The strengths and weaknesses of these models are examined. American experience is compared with the experience of other nations, such as China, Cuba, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia, to assess the art of creating housing in world terms.

The third part, “Rethinking Public Life,” examines the relationship between better housing design and public space. These chapters explore how and where housing meets community development. They deal with rehabilitation of the existing American fabric of homes and neighborhoods, as well as with suggestions for new construction. They include many examples of demonstration projects—good and bad—undertaken by individuals, small groups, local governments, and national governments.

Finding an egalitarian approach to affordable housing must involve individuals, families, neighbors’ groups, citizens’ groups, local officials, national policymakers, and practitioners in the planning and design professions. It affects employed parents who are concerned about their children and their children’s futures as well
as single people and the elderly who seek new options. Employed women and their families constitute an absolute majority of American citizens, a majority whose voices must be heard on questions of housing design and policy.