

CHAPTER 1

New Houses and New Communities

POST WWII NEW HOMES
VS.
WINTERGARDEN TRS

The recollections excerpted in the prologue describe the dominant “American Dream” of the 1940s and 1950s: homeownership for (practically) everyone who wanted it.¹ Ownership of a new, well-functioning little house and yard, and the opportunity to found a new way of life in a new place. These recollections come from people who bought houses during the first postwar years—that is, 1945 to 1960 or 1965. When prospective owners made their choices about where and how to live during these fifteen to twenty years, they selected among radically new dwelling designs. American house types, house plans, and housing environments were utterly transformed in this period. The transformation was achieved by “merchant builders,” a new type of builder/developer. The builders of this era responded to the desires and preferences of the buyers, at the same time as they, the builders, helped to shape those preferences. In thousands of new suburban communities, a builder erected a few model houses, usually split-levels or ranches, and a family selected the one that suited its members. The new suburbs of these years were formed by the multiplication of these actions and choices.

This book examines these builders and buyers: the new house types they built during the first two decades after World War II, and the new communities that the houses formed. More than thirteen million of these predominantly ranch and split-level houses were constructed after the war, on large “tracts” or



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< Levittown, PA



By Dana Castro with Keller Williams Real Estate



Contingent

For Sale

Yours

\$274,900 ↓

3 bed 1 bath 1,000 sqft 8,640 sqft lot

33 Tanglewood Ln,
Levittown, PA, 19054

Commute time

Noise: Medium

FEMA Zone X (est.) • Flood Factor 1 / 10

COMPARISON
OF POST WWII
MASS HOME BUILDING
HOME SIZES TO
WINTER GREEN'S

\$911/mo



Property Type

Days on Realtor.com

Price per sqft

Single Family Home

21 Days

\$275

Last Sold

Year Built

Style

Home Size \$200k in 2013

1953

Ranch/rambler

3 STORY 1 CAR
GARAGE - 926SF

2 STORY - 766SF

Ask a question

Share this home

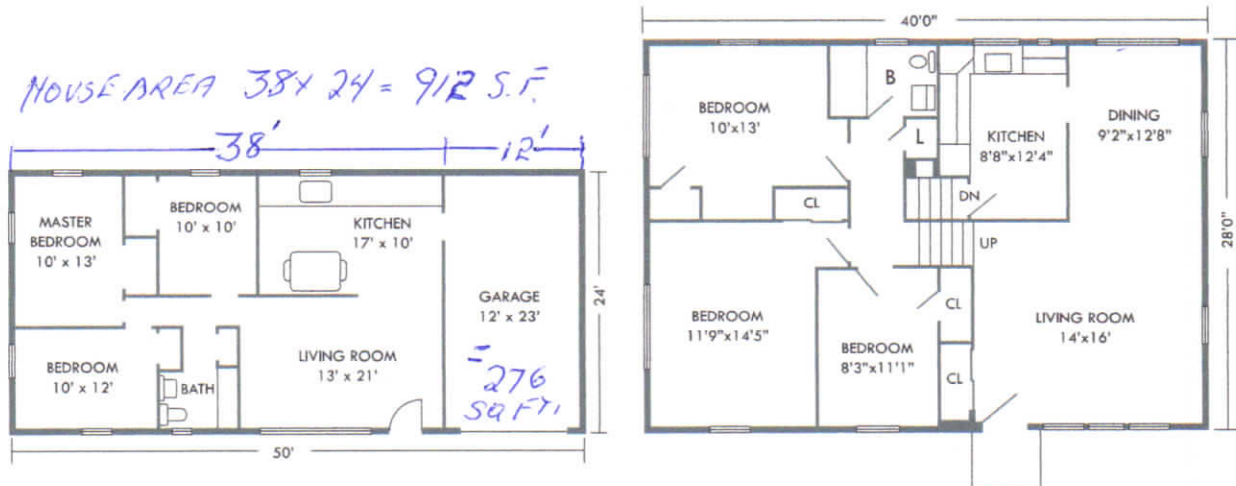
Open Houses

Property Details

Home Value

Monthly Payment

Property History



the “living room,” the eating area was not fully separate (in fact it was often part of the kitchen), kitchens were large and open to other living areas (figs. 8, 11). The kitchen, no longer the domain of a household servant, formed a significant part of the living space of the house.⁹ Bedrooms were separate only in the sense that they were located away from the living room (figs. 8, 9). A large “picture window” gave the living room a powerful connection to the street, and windows or sliding doors in the rear gave easy visual access to a deep interior back yard. Light flooded the interiors through these large windows. Interior finishes were sleek and shiny; furniture was sparse (sometimes built-in) and “modern-looking,” appliances lavish for the time (figs. 10, 11, 12). With their bare surfaces, relative absence of historical references, and open and functional planning, the new houses corresponded in almost every way to what we now think of as “modern” (or “modernist”) architecture. Gone were all the formal elements of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century domestic planning: the porch, the formal entry, the formal reception rooms. Gone was the air of self-sufficiency that is expressed in the exterior in figure 2. The new houses faced the street instead of turning away from it, and they were visually related to one another as a result of their siting. It is clear from plans and exterior views alone that these were houses for a new time and for a different lifestyle.

For an observer standing on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street, the houses, front yards, sidewalks, and, frequently, grass strips created a striking new pattern (fig. 13). The houses were close together: sometimes no more than twenty-five feet separated them. From some angles the houses looked almost connected. No fences or hedges divided the front yards,¹⁰ and these contained little landscaping: usually low bushes around the base of the house, occasionally a tree next to the driveway. Front lawns, in the past visually an entryway to the house—a carpet flanking the walk leading to the entry—now appeared

8. Campanelli Brothers, “The Crest,” Brockton, MA, 1957, plan. Restored by Nathanael Roesch from a newspaper advertisement of October 1958.

9. Ralph Bodek, split-level house, Lawrence Park, PA, ca. 1955, plan. Nathanael Roesch from a detailed plan in the Marple Township Zoning Office.