

“A Way of Living”
Representations of Homeownership in *LIFE Magazine*

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Introduction

“It is a way of living that a man and woman buy when they buy a house.”
(*LIFE Magazine*, January 31, 1949)

Throughout U.S.-American history, homeowners have held a special, exalted position within society, based on ideological constructions of homeownership.¹ An early example of these idealized representations of homeownership is Thomas Jefferson’s conception of the yeoman farmer which characterized him as “independent and responsible, economically productive, and morally respectable” (De Neufville & Barton 186).

Representations of homeownership are not only praised within presidential rhetoric such as Jefferson’s, but also play a crucial role within the overall Cultural Imaginary of U.S. society.² When traveling the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed ownership projections in the public mind. According to Tocqueville, due to the possibility of ownership Americans had “acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands” (620). Note Tocqueville’s choice of wording: he did not say that property owners in fact have their whole destiny in their own hands. Rather, “they are apt to imagine” that they do, which suggests that the way in which these property owners see themselves – or are projected by others – may well diverge from their actual situation.

Jefferson’s and Tocqueville’s statements exemplify an important aspect of homeownership ideology: homeownership is presented (and often perceived) as a generally laudable and desirable way of living.³ The above citation from *LIFE Magazine* also makes just this point. It stems from the article “A Round Table on Housing” which suggests to the

¹ I use the term ideology not in its political sense, but rather as designating a system of representations, perceptions and images. Such representations are generally based on a set of assumptions, and they define parameters of the real and the self (in Althusser’s terms: “a social subject’s ‘lived’ relation to the real”). By appealing to a person’s unconscious fears, desires and rational interests, it influences the way in which that person perceives its social reality and its place within it (Kavannah).

² For an informative and concise discussion of the concept of “Cultural Imaginary”, see Schwab: “Just as persons receive and harbor clusters of unconscious ideas, so [...] do cultures. They may materialize as ingrained cultural ideologies or as shared cultural phantasms, or they may be elaborated in myths, literature and other forms of art. We may assume that a culture’s poetry, fiction, and related arts generate a certain cultural idiom, providing abstract shapes that resonate with its particular culture of emotions, moods, tastes, values and mental structures” (174).

³ Professor Dolores Hayden refers to Americans’ homes as “the spatial representation of American hopes for the good life” (38).

readers that it is worth putting thought and money into one’s own house, because, supposedly, “[a] house is not just a box: it is a way of life” (“A Round Table on Housing” 86). This article, discussed further in chapter 3, is one of many: published from 1936 until 1972, *LIFE* featured hundreds of articles on homeownership in the United States which illustrated the lifestyles to be led within one’s own home – according to *LIFE*. This study examines the ways in which homeownership ideology was projected, regulated and constructed by *LIFE Magazine* and how this compared with other homeownership ideologies (or projected lifestyles) of its time.

In *Cultural Geography of the United States*, cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky referred to representations of “the American house” as a “completely appropriate capsule world, fleshing out the main principles, myths, and values of the larger cultural system” (94). In particular, I found that projections of homeownership within *LIFE* “fleshed out” myths and values that shape the nation’s social and cultural hierarchy such as race, class, and gender. Therefore, by analyzing representations of homeownership within *LIFE*, I also discuss constructions of race, class, and gender.

Class, in particular, plays an important role in this analysis. Throughout the years, consumption and property ownership have remained core elements in determining class status. In *Theories of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899, Thorstein Veblen developed a theory which proposed a direct correlation between property and class status within American society. His concept of “conspicuous consumption” maintained that individuals form their consumption habits so as to match those of people higher than themselves in the social stratum:

In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure of the lowest strata. The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance ... No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. (Veblen; quoted in Wisman 89-90)

As is demonstrated throughout this thesis, Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption was visionary and captured the dynamics of twentieth century U.S. society as well: “Veblen anticipated the post-World War II focus on the American new middle classes in his treatment of those late nineteenth and early twentieth century political, religious, and cultural institutions which were both adapting to and providing direction for emerging corporate capitalism” (Levy 16).⁴ Aspirations to homeownership are a form of conspicuous consumption, which is particularly well illustrated by the fact that “in their sacrifices to obtain home-ownership, not all working-class families obtained middle-class housing technological amenities and conveniences” (Hubka & Kenny 51).⁵

As most magazines of its time, *LIFE* was most popular among readers with above average incomes. A 1967 W. R. Simmons study of magazine readership in greater Chicago confirms this: Among the top two income categories (with yearly incomes above \$15,000), 44.2% reported to read *LIFE* and these numbers dropped in the bottom two categories. Among those earning between \$5,000 and \$7,999, readership was around 23.3%; in households with incomes below \$5,000 it was as low as 11-9% (Baughman 45). As a consequence, *LIFE* has been perceived as speaking “to and [...] for middle class Americans” (Hales 105). However, *LIFE* primarily invented and visualized an ideal middle class. The magazine’s founding “coincided almost exactly with the rising impulse to discover America’s essence in ‘the average’” (Marchand 128). Accordingly, while the magazine’s target audience generally belonged to the middle and upper classes, it was generally implied that the homes introduced to readers were attainable for the average-income American.⁶

⁴ For a discussion of the relevance of Veblen to U.S. society in the twenty-first century (in particular as an explanation for the low savings rate among Americans) see Wisman.

⁵ Furthermore, property-holding has been linked with power and access to power. For example, based on property qualifications for voting and office holding, the U.S. Constitution could be ratified by only about one-sixth of the adult male population (who owned not only land but also slaves), excluding “a large propertyless mass” which could not be counted to the “victorious middle class” of the American Revolution (Diggins 557). Only by 1860 were white male tenants allowed to vote in some elections (Gilderbloom & Markham 1581). African Americans, Native Americans and women remained excluded from elections. While the 1965 Voting Rights Act gave all American citizens of age the right to vote in federal elections regardless of race, gender or property, as late as 1995 tenants were still barred from voting in certain bond, tax, and special district elections, granting homeowners a higher access to power than renters (Gilderblom & Markham 1591).

⁶ One prime example of *LIFE*’s focus on presenting the “average” or “typical” American was its 1937 story on Muncie, Indiana, which was the locus of Helen and Robert Lynd’s sociological study “Middletown”. The *LIFE* story opted for “overlooking all the reasons that the Lynds had given for choosing a decisively nontypical American city for their studies (Muncie was exceptional in the small size of its immigrant and African American populations), *Life* proclaimed that [their] photographs of Muncie had ‘set down for all time ... the average 1937 American as he really is.’ In visiting Middletown, *Life* had essentially visited ‘every small U.S. city from Maine to California” (Marchand 128-9).

LIFE's approach of influencing instead of simply informing its readership can be traced back to its publisher Henry Luce and his editorial board made up of “Ivy League-educated white males [...] guiding ‘the mass’ ... ‘with a strong hand’” (Doss 14). Luce’s values were reflected within his publication. It was up to Luce to decide what exactly to put into the magazine. Luce was convinced that *LIFE* had the power (and the responsibility) to shape Americans’ opinions and outlooks, and to shape national identity, noting in 1961, that “[p]artly because we are a vast continental nation [...] it has been the magazine, far more than the newspaper, which has held the country together in nationwide community” (quoted in Baughman 42).

The projections of homeownership within *LIFE* are deeply racialized. While the magazine was generally sympathetic to the plight of African Americans and “accepted African Americans’ demands for legal equality” (Kozol 161), it deemed racism to be a localized problem of the South, suggesting that the separate but equal doctrine was “emphatically the will of the white South, and the other sections of the nations acquiesced” (Kozol 163). In general, *LIFE*'s treatment of minority issues implied that black America’s main challenge consisted of socioeconomic problems rather than white racism on a national scale. A 1956 four-part series on “The American Negro” exemplifies this. African Americans’ economic struggles, wrote *LIFE*, constituted a “social problem that the (white) nation must solve” (Kozol 161/2). Accordingly, stories on African Americans within *LIFE* did not focus on success stories of the already existing and growing black middle class, but rather on life in the ghettos and on Southern farms.⁷ As far *LIFE* and its readers were concerned, American homeowners – and thus the American middle class – were white, excluding African Americans from the notion of conspicuous consumption.⁸

LIFE may have been a primarily middle class, white magazine, but its reach and influence were considerable, and for most of its publication period “in its size and aspiration [LIFE] had no equal” (Baughman 41). A 1950 Alfred Politz market research found that over

⁷ A large part of *LIFE*'s coverage of black America was in fact photographed by Gordon Parks, an African American photographer who viewed his photographic agenda as “humanizing black America for *Life*'s primarily white readers” (Doss, “Visualizing Black America...” 236).

⁸ At times, black homeownership was mentioned in passing. An example of this will be covered in chapter 4. While *LIFE* focused on examples of African Americans’ struggle and poverty, its African American counterpart *Ebony*, which started publication in 1945, “aimed to ‘mirror the happier sides of Negro life – the positive, everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood’” (Doss, “Visualizing...” 233). Just as *LIFE* boasted a primarily middle class white audience, *Ebony* targeted a middle class black audience, viewing itself “as a magazine specifically for and about middle-class and upwardly mobile African Americans” (Doss, “Visualizing...” 233). Interestingly enough, *Ebony* used *LIFE* as its main media model in not just copying the logo, but also arranging its page layouts and type fonts in direct correlation to *LIFE*.

the course of 13 weeks, about half of all Americans ten and older had seen one or more copies of *LIFE* (Baughman 42) based on its high pass-along rate and the fact that it was available to flick through for instance at hairdressers and in doctors’ offices. Due to its popularity, influential contemporaries took the magazine seriously: John F. Kennedy was known to closely monitor *LIFE*’s treatment of his presidency because “in Washington for some twenty-five years [*LIFE*] had been awesome, a dominant national vehicle” (Baughman 42). Almost from the very beginning, *LIFE* boasted “iconic presence and cultural prestige. Abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock hoarded copies of *Life*’s August 8, 1949, issue, his first appearance in the magazine [...] Getting on the cover of *Life* was considered the pinnacle of postwar success for everyone from the Hollywood stars who craved it to the authors who mocked it” (Doss 3).

LIFE’s most important features were its images and photographs, as many of its “readers” flicking through the magazine were mostly susceptible to the images’ messages as opposed to the words accompanying them. Pictures used throughout the magazine’s spreads (called “photographic essays” in *LIFE*) were carefully staged: *LIFE*’s photographers “persuaded their subjects to ‘chop down trees ... move fences, paint walls [and] put on their Sunday clothes when it was only Tuesday” (Guimond 160). The images of homeowners and their homes reflect the changes that *LIFE* – as well as the ideology of homeownership featured within it – underwent throughout its almost forty-year publication history. This can be roughly put into three phases. Phase 1 is illustrated by figure I.1 printed in 1939, in which the young couple gazing at a model of a so-called “LIFE-house” exemplifies the way in which *LIFE* projected homeownership in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In this depiction, homes should be both modern and affordable to young families. As is demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2, *LIFE* portrayed homeownership as an easily achievable and affordable dream for young couples that bolstered family stability and supported the U.S. economy. Phase 2 is illustrated by figure I.2, taken from a 1958 *LIFE* article entitled “More Livable Homes”. In this phase, discussed in chapters 3 and 4, twenty years after heralding modern, standardized housing, *LIFE* turned its attention to more spacious homes that served primarily as gathering places for families and friends located among neighbors with similar backgrounds. Finally, in a third phase, throughout the 1960s, *LIFE* shifted its focus away from the homeowners themselves and focused much more on the architecture and design of their houses. It also removed homeownership from its traditionally suburban context. This can be gleaned from Figure I.3, taken from the 1965 article “A Bold Splash”.

“A Way of Living”: Representations of Homeownership in *LIFE Magazine*



Figure I.1: This image will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 1.



Figure I.2: This image will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

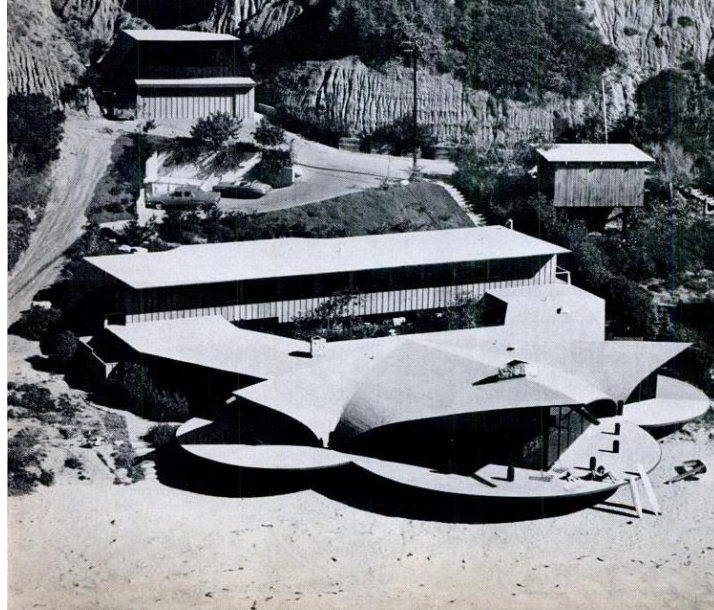


Figure 1.3: This image will be discussed in greater length in Chapter 5.

Along with magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Reader's Digest*, *LIFE* is seen to be “almost precisely consonant with the same messages from Hollywood, Madison Avenue, Broadway, and the Savoy” (Rovit 551-2).⁹ Therefore, it was part of a *field of presence*, which Foucault described as made up of “all statements formulated elsewhere and taken up in a discourse, acknowledged to be truthful, involving exact description, well-founded reasoning, or necessary presupposition” (Foucault 57). Based on this *field of presence* consisting of symbols and messages formulated in the movies, theaters and advertisements, *LIFE* provides insights into its era’s cultural discourse. And yet, “for all its iconicity and influence, *Life* has been surprisingly unstudied, especially from its context as a popular weekly magazine and visual resource” (Doss 4). This study aims at remedying this to an extent.

For a better understanding of how *LIFE* constructed its representations, this study incorporates other sources as well. The absence of African American homeowners from the pages of *LIFE*, for example, becomes all the more striking – and more noteworthy – when comparable magazines feature African American homeowners.¹⁰ Likewise, parallels between advertisements and arguments within *LIFE* support the conclusion that *LIFE* was a highly consumerist-driven publication and so I included advertisements to prove that point.

⁹ In 1937, Luce addressed the American Association of Advertising Agencies, asking of them to commit their clients’ money to his new publication and to “appropriate over the next ten critical years no less than \$100 million” (Smith 29). It remains unclear how much sway advertising agencies held in terms of product placement within the magazine, Campbell Soup Company ads were “‘guaranteed’ the ‘key position next to *Life*’s editorial page” (Doss 10).

¹⁰ Consider Foucault: “we must also give our attention to those that are [...] rejected or excluded” (57).

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Because representations of homeownership evolved over time, this thesis is organized chronologically, covering *LIFE*'s years of publication from 1936 to 1972. It should be noted that the vast majority of *LIFE* articles – and some additional newspapers stories quoted from – do not feature an author's name. In these instances articles are referenced by title only.

Chapter 1 (1936-1941)

The first chapter explores representations of homeownership within *LIFE* and other discourses in the years immediately following the Great Depression. Throughout the 1930s, worries about the outdated and often dilapidated nature of American housing dominated much of the discourse on housing in general. “Adequate” housing of sound construction and with access to electricity and running water was in short supply. Following the stock market crash of 1929 and with an economy still reeling from the Depression, people were hesitant to take out loans to buy homes, so the government stepped in with a wide array of housing programs, many of which provided rental options. At the same time, advances in construction methods and technology opened up the possibility of cheaper home construction and better access to electricity and modern appliances.

Within this chapter, I discuss how *LIFE* introduced readers to public and private housing options and the line of argument employed to convince its readership which housing solution is the “better” one. Furthermore, I explore how the electrification of America homes was represented and I follow the ways in which *LIFE* projected the life of rural homeowners.

Chapter 2 (1942-1947)

The second chapter covers World War II and the years immediately following the war. The U.S. entry into the Second World War had a considerable impact on the construction industry as building materials were required for the war effort. Furthermore, especially in war production centers, the war reshaped communities profoundly along class, gender and race lines. As working class renters arrived by the thousands in war production centers and were perceived as nothing more than war profiteers by an irate, home-owning middle class in these areas, tensions rose. As women streamed into the war plants, gender lines were renegotiated to a certain extent for the time being. And as the migratory movements into defense centers included many African Americans in search of higher wages and better living conditions than they had been afforded in rural, Southern areas, race conflicts ensued – in particular surrounding war housing projects. This chapter also deals with homeownership representations in times of a nationwide housing shortage following the war, as veterans

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returned to the States eager to become homeowners, yet were unable to do so as home construction rates during the War could not anticipate the upcoming demand.

Throughout chapter 2, I elaborate on the ways in which the war featured into *LIFE*'s representations of homeownership. In addition, I examine how – and if – the renegotiations of gender and race tensions of that time found their way into the magazine's homeownership discourse and discuss the implications.

Chapter 3 (1948-1958)

This chapter examines changing ideologies of homeownership in the early stages of the Cold War and amidst the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the World War over and the Korean War coming to an end in 1953, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower had to adapt the American economy to peacetime. President Eisenhower in particular called for every American to become a homeowner. In an effort to achieve this goal, lending policies were liberalized which led to mortgages being more easily available than ever before. In addition, as education levels and average incomes rose steadily, higher standards of living became attainable to an ever increasing number of Americans who were willing – and able – to become homeowners in the newly developed suburbs.

Within this chapter I pay special attention to the construction of class in connection with *LIFE*'s discourse on homeownership as this period marks the first time when *LIFE* explicitly addressed the differences among classes within U.S.-American society. I also demonstrate the ways in which peacetime homeownership projections in the 1950s differed from peacetime homeownership portrayals before the U.S. entered World War II.

Chapter 4 (1959-1965)

Chapter 4, covering the first half of the 1960s, illustrates segregation among homeowners along racial as well as age and class lines. Calls for open housing became louder and more pronounced in the early 1960s. While the Kennedy administration passed *Executive Order 11063 for Equal Opportunity in Housing* in November, 1962, this order only strove to prevent racial discrimination in federally owned and operated housing thus failing to truly open white suburbs to African American homeowners. At the same time, society was getting older and as it was expected that the number of citizens over the age of 65 would double over the coming four decades, discussions of how to deal with an aging population played a considerable role in the political discourse.

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Throughout chapter 4 I discuss the narratives employed by *LIFE* in its representations of segregation among homeowners and I compare these narratives to those found in other magazines of the time. Furthermore, I address the conclusions that can be drawn from the representations of segregation within *LIFE*.

Chapter 5 (1966-1973)

Chapter 5 covers the end of one of the most prolonged periods of economic growth in the United States as well as the end of *LIFE*. Despite their economic success, the 1960s were a restless period – particularly in its second half. The Vietnam War, which had begun in 1961, escalated beginning in 1965, with public opposition to the war effort growing ever more pronounced. In addition, as incomes steadily continued to rise, Americans continued to outspend these incomes. As the economic boom came to a halt with a recession in 1969/70 (Raeithel III 401-420), even *LIFE* acknowledged in one article on homeownership entitled “Almost all of them end up in the red” that the need to keep up with the “way of living” associated with homeownership in the United States caused economic difficulties for American homeowners.

In this last chapter, I examine how *LIFE*’s homeownership projections during this period compare to those of previous years – in particular the 1930s. I also demonstrate and discuss the ways in which *LIFE* employed its ideology of homeownership to address a nation at odds with itself.

Overall, American society underwent a range of transformative processes between the 1930s and 1970s, which found their way into the ideological constructions of homeownership. To look at the period between the 1930s to the 1970s means to look at the first “Golden Age of Homeownership” during which time the United States became a nation of homeowners. In the conclusion to this dissertation I discuss if and how *LIFE*’s homeownership representations hold any relevance today.

Chapter 1 (1936 – 1941): “A Failure, A Problem, A Potential Boon and Boom” – Home Construction and Homeownership after the Great Depression

Publication of *LIFE* began in 1936 and the magazine quickly achieved rising readership numbers. By its third issue, its editors boasted: “We guessed 250,000, you bought 400,000, newsdealers are asking for 200,000 more” (quoted in Smith 36). A magazine that implied a celebration of consumerism and the capitalist system within its pages was of particular interest to U.S. businesses at the time. By 1936, after the public had voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal, “corporate leaders almost unanimously saw themselves as having been cast in the role of national villains and the entire business system as suffering from ‘vicious public attacks’. Even the mildest assessments of the situation concluded that ‘the government was giving business a black eye with the public’” (Marchand 126). Corporations viewed *LIFE* with a favorable eye not only because of its attractive advertising space, but also because of its critique of New Deal programs. The first *LIFE* article I discuss below illustrates that while critical of the construction industry to a degree, *LIFE* is quick to point out the industry’s potential to lift the U.S. economy out of its current miserable state. Simultaneously, the article finds harsh words for public housing programs. The article also exemplifies the overall tone to be found in *LIFE*’s representations of homeownership throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s: offering encouragement and advice for potential homeowners, and presenting homeownership as a better solution to poor living conditions and economic malaise than public rental programs.

In general, the homeowners’ situation in the early 1930s was viewed as dire; in 1933, homes in nonfarm communities were foreclosed at the rate of 1,000 a day, with the average borrower two years behind on his mortgage (Tough 325). American farmers had been experiencing economic hardship before 1929, and the onset of the Great Depression “merely downgraded the agricultural economy from perilous to hopeless” (Fliter&Hoff 1). Similar to the homeowners in the nonfarm communities, farm owners, too, were heavily mortgaged: “In Minnesota, paying the average debt on a mortgaged farm had required 116 bushels of wheat in 1919 and 173 bushels in 1925; in 1933, it required 743 bushels” (Fliter&Hoff 48).¹¹

As a matter of fact, speculation in real estate throughout the 1920s played a part in the onset of the Depression (see Fisher). The 1933 article “Home, Sweet Home” by Mitchell Dawson, published in *Harper’s Monthly*, berated politicians and lending institutions alike for

¹¹ While the numbers presented by Fliter and Hoff refer specifically to Minnesota, they can be seen as indicative of the general situation in the United States at the time.

suggesting throughout the 1920s that homeownership could be attained and *maintained* by millions, if only lending procedures were liberal enough. Dawson suggests that these lending procedures have instead cost people their homes:

The home owner has been gypped [...] and honeyfugled by subdividers, contractors, loan agencies, utility companies, labor racketeers, building inspectors, title guarantee companies, and taxing bodies. He finds himself now either stripped of his home and his savings, without prospect of future security, or staggering under a load which sticks to his back as hard and fast as the old man of the sea. (Dawson 564)

Throughout this article, Dawson references a speech held by President Hoover one year previously. In his address at the White House Conference on Home Ownership on December 2, 1931, Hoover claimed:

There is a wide distinction between homes and mere housing. Those immortal ballads, Home, Sweet Home; My Old Kentucky Home; and the Little Gray Home in the West, were not written about tenements or apartments. They are the expressions of racial longing which find outlet in the living poetry and songs of our people. They were written about an individual abode, alive with the tender associations of childhood, the family life at the fireside, the free out of doors, the independence, the security, and the pride in possession of the family's own home-the very seat of its being. (Hoover)

Dawson counters these values of American self-conception by exclaiming that “We put far too much stress on the advantages of mere ownership, which to a large extent are a figment of the mind” (574). In Hoover’s words the owner-occupied home is a “racial longing”, something that the human race as a whole strives for. Furthermore, Hoover portrayed the owner-occupied home as a place of independence, security and freedom, according to Dawson, by the early 1930s there was “no place so burdened with debt, no place that has suffered so much from the bedevilmments of gold brick twins of our economic life – speculation and exploitation” (564). Dawson laid the blame for the heavy mortgage load at a campaign by American businesses throughout the 1920s. Americans, according to Dawson, had been hesitant to become homeowners, because they feared taking out mortgages and

going into debt. To remove this obstacle, “The potential home buyer had to be educated out of his foolish notions, and he was educated with a vengeance” (566).

Speculation in real estate had been rampant in the years leading up to the Great Depression and throughout the early 1930s. To a large extent, speculation involved vacant lots instead of constructed homes; investors formed syndicates to buy up large tracts of land surrounding the cities, awaiting a rise in values. As a result, the fringes of large cities were surrounded by “a great belt of [...] idle land, grown up in weeds, delinquent in taxes, and derelict” (Fisher 155).¹² These speculators could win big or lose bigger. This affected not only a small group of select investors, but also often middle-class earners who had hoped to multiply their savings in this way. However, not only speculators who had miscalculated were suffering. Throughout the first half of the 1930s, property was in decline.

In addition to failed speculations, both the old age and poor quality of the U.S.-American housing stock at the time were identified as problems. In 1935, the *Real Property Inventory* carried out a survey of residential structures in 64 American cities to determine the “typical” American home. It was found that urban U.S. housing stock was outdated: 18% of homes were 20 to 30 years old, 22% 30 to 50 years old, and 8% were older than 50 years. These homes’ old age meant that most of them were made of wood and thus prone to go up in flames (Engle 288-9). Furthermore, modern electrical appliances such as mechanical refrigeration could be found in not even half the homes. While owner-occupied homes fared generally better than rented homes in this regard, here, too, the figures were low (Engle 289).

Most strikingly, the inventory found that sanitary plumbing was absent “on a much larger scale than is commonly realized” (Engle 290) and that there was demand for approximately 1,500,000 new dwelling units in urban areas of the United States to avoid overcrowding in the accommodation of people (Engle 294). But, most importantly:

Whether we like it or not the facts clearly indicate widespread sub-standard living conditions throughout American cities. Communities of all sizes share the doubtful honor of permitting large segments of the population to exist in the meanest sort of living quarters, many of which are highly

¹² Dr. Ernest Fisher was an urban land economist who served as director of education and research for the National Association of Real Estate Boards as well as a director of economics and statistics and economic adviser for the Federal Housing Administration. From 1948 onwards he headed Columbia’s Institute for Urban Land Use and Housing Studies.

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unsanitary and therefore a distinct menace to the health of our people.
(Engle 294)

Overall housing conditions in rural areas were generally worse: “rural housing has lagged even far to the rear of the bad housing standards in cities” (Alfred 553). The conclusion drawn from findings of the *Real Property Inventory* as well as Census data and surveys of rural areas was that about a third of the American population could be deemed as living in “structures unfit for human habitation” (Dunn 1879). In response, a variety of public housing options was devised to take care of this ill-housed third.

This chapter answers the following questions: How did *LIFE* address the issue of public vs. private housing options? Which aspects set homeowners’ homes apart from renters’ homes in *LIFE*’s homeownership representations of the time? Did the magazine discriminate between rural and urban/suburban homeownership?

Public vs. Private Housing Programs

The Roosevelt administration’s public housing projects were harshly criticized for being inadequately planned and unable to cover all households in need of better housing. In 1936, *Harper’s Monthly* published a commentary entitled “Our Housing Hodge-Podge” which admonished that public housing ventures had not delivered on their promises:

The President is keenly aware of our housing deficiencies. Indeed, adequate and decent homes for working men’s families constitute one of his leading objectives. But his hastily planned experiments in this field have produced disappointing results – in some quarters complete disillusionment. (Pusey 60)

According to Pusey, not only had results been disappointing, but it was also “obviously unfair as well as impracticable to draw upon the public treasury to provide for indigent families houses far better than the average renter can afford” – with government homes being constructed for \$4,000 to \$5,000, while the median renter inhabited homes valued around \$2,700 (Pusey 65).

One housing development the article referred to repeatedly was Greenbelt, a neighborhood just seven miles outside of Washington D.C. which provided rental homes to government workers at considerably lower costs than they had to pay for their substandard apartments in the city. According to the author, if the Roosevelt administration continued to

offer public housing options as expensive as Greenbelt, it would only be able to provide housing for one in every 440 families currently inhabiting substandard dwellings (Pusey 65).¹³

A few months after *Harper's Monthly* ran this article *LIFE* also introduced its readers to Greenbelt, using this representation of a public housing project to argue that public housing was not the way to address the American housing situation. Published on November 15, 1937, this photographic essay carried the title “American Housing: A Failure, A Problem, A Potential Boon and Boom”. On seven pages, *LIFE* presented and evaluated a variety of housing options and the state of housing in the United States. The article’s main message was this: public housing ventures had proven to be “a failure”, the current state of U.S.-American housing was “a problem”, and the potential of *private* housing construction and homeownership promised to be “a potential boon and boom” which would not only enable more Americans to live in better homes, but could also prove to be a valuable tool in relieving the America economy.

The article catches the reader’s attention with an image of Greenbelt (Figure 1.1), which takes up half a page. At first glance, the photograph seems to back up the article’s first two sentences lauding the development as a “wonderful place [...] close to being Utopia” (“American Housing...” 45). The aerial photograph provides the reader with an overall impression of the development. It showcases the greenery and the footpaths connecting the homes removed from the street. At the same time, as the reader is so far removed from the homes and no life is exhibited within the image (apart from a car parked in front of one house there is no indication that the homes are inhabited), the chosen image underscores the article’s assessment of public housing projects being little more than “demonstration projects”:

¹³ Public housing ventures were mostly criticized for being too limited in scope so that they would not suffice to cover the need in housing. The Citizens Housing Council compiled a report in 1938 which came to the conclusion that, with regards to New York City, federal, state and city housing programs would only provide for “few, if any, of the more than 600,000 families of New York City now living in physically substandard dwellings” (“Housing Programs Held Inadequate”). In 1939, another article suggested that “Subsidized housing can bring relief from intolerable living conditions to, at best, a few hundred thousand people among the 11,000,000 American families now forced to remain in substandard dwellings” (Rheinstein & Pringle 525). Possibly in an effort to address these public concerns, plans for public housing measures were altered to lower construction costs. This is exemplified by the Red Hooks housing development in New York City. Opening in June, 1936, the project had cost \$18 million instead of the expected \$40 million. This came at a price, however: the generous floor plans were altered significantly, with rooms decreased in size, doors removed between living and dining rooms and generally mostly curtains instead of doors before storage areas. Starting with Red Hook, increasing the standard of living for the ill-housed third was no longer the primary goal of governmental housing programs. Rather, saving construction costs was. Today, Red Hook is synonymous with crime, drugs and squalid living conditions (Richter).

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Greenbelt is characteristic of New Deal housing ventures. For nearly five years the humanitarian Roosevelt administration has stumbled & fumbled along with such expensive, uncoordinated ‘demonstration projects,’ made scarcely a dent in the great and growing problem of providing adequate living quarters for the ‘ill-housed’ one-third of America. (“American Housing...” 45)

Additionally, the author explains that these New Deal housing ventures make “a tiny start on a gigantic job” (“American Housing...” 49), a claim that is further underlined by the chosen image: in showing Greenbelt from above, the homes look literally tiny.

LIFE’s view of Greenbelt and other governmental housing projects is similar to that within *Harper’s Monthly*. The article mentions the high costs incurred in the construction of these homes that were “electrified to the hilt” and bemoans that rents were kept artificially low. The author suggests to the readers that the resulting balance of rent was “charged up to American taxpayers, a great majority of whom can afford nowhere near such fine accommodations for themselves” (“American Housing...” 45).



Figure 1.1: *LIFE* chose to show Greenbelt in an aerial photograph, thus underscoring its claim that the development was literally a “tiny” step in solving the housing crisis.

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The article’s author further argues that rents in Greenbelt and comparable developments are too high for the “truly poor” slum dwellers. One qualification to live in Greenbelt was an average annual income around \$1,200 which low-level government workers and accountants made (“American Housing...” 46).¹⁴ Consequently, the author surmised, providing families from this income group with publicly financed housing would neither solve the housing crisis nor the economic crisis at hand. Instead, the author presented homeownership as the only viable solution:

Housing Administrator Straus estimates that the Government, at best, can supply no more than 10% of America’s ‘terrifying’ housing shortage. The rest is up to private capital. Private capital will never supply homes for slum-dwellers, because there is no profit in it. But there are millions of better-off Americans who could if they would, or would if they could, have newer, better homes. On them depends the great, prosperity-bringing, long-expected Building Boom whose failure to develop this year is a factor in the current business slump. (“American Housing...” 50)¹⁵

The quote conveys the message that it is up to the people to revive the American economy, and that homeownership on a large scale can cause a “Building Boom” which will bring prosperity to the nation. To base this call for more homeownership on the damnation of public housing projects is logically flawed, yet this was the line of argument which *LIFE* employed for years to come. The author suggests that the people – rather than the U.S. government – are responsible for fostering prosperity. The idea that home construction was the means to put an end to all economic worries of the decade was shared by many, and voiced particularly well by Yale economics professor J.E. McDonough in 1934:

Time-honored dependables for depression relief – the railroad and the automobile – whatever may have been their past virtue are no longer seriously regarded as the solution to our present difficulties [...] Gradually but persistently a realization is developing that invigoration of the heavy

¹⁴ As a matter of fact, based on a nationwide survey from 1937, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Labor Department estimated that the average income ranged from \$1,178 to \$1,589 which was deemed to be sufficient “for a decent standard of living” for a family of four (“Income Studies”).

¹⁵ It should also be noted that in addition to the call for increased home construction, many newspapers of the time also devoted a lot of page space to encouraging those already owning their homes to remodel and modernize. Theme pages devoted to the topic urged their readers that “It’s the Commonsense Thing to BUILD and REMODEL Now”, and that they should “Beat the Boom! BUILD, REPAIR, or REMODEL in 1937”.

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industries must be sought in a widespread and elaborate program of building construction. (McDonough 668)

It must be noted, however, that McDonough talks about an “elaborate program of building construction”. This reference to a “program” suggests governmental measures as opposed to the private home construction heralded by *LIFE* which was to be carried out by “better-off Americans”. The *LIFE* article does not explicitly define which income suffices to qualify one as being “better-off”, but it does introduce architect Alden Dow and his affordable home designs. The first of his homes featured in the article is one selling for \$2,500 (Figure 1.2). A family with an annual income of \$1,200 would qualify for such an expense. It is therefore implied that the Greenbelt families could buy such a house. This Dow home may not be “electrified to the hilt” as were its Greenbelt counterparts – at least neither of the images nor the text suggest that they may be. Instead, the authors are quick to point out that the ingenious insulation keeps the home’s inside ten degrees cooler in summer (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.2: By choosing to include a baby carriage in front of the house, *LIFE*'s editors imply that – while small – the home is sufficient to house a family.



Figure 1.3: The girl faces the reader, thereby inviting him into the house.

The inside of these homes consists of an open combination living room with dinette and kitchen, as well as two bedrooms and a basement. The living area of the Dow home is considerably smaller than that of the Greenbelt homes, which include separate living and dining rooms. Yet, the image (1.3) illustrating the Dow living area makes this confined space look both practical as well as cozy.

The home seems practical, because the mother is visible in the background by the refrigerator, while her child is seen in the foreground, thus implying that the mother can easily supervise her children while preparing dinner.

The home seems cozy, because there is a functioning fireplace in front of which lies a reading child. The child has its head turned, facing the reader, thus appearing to invite him or her in to join the family for dinner by the fireside, or to join them in their ranks of homeowners by buying their own home. This stands in contrast to the images of the Greenbelt family, which is shown having dinner and spending time in the living room of their new Greenbelt home (Figure 1.4). None of the family members faces the reader; they are solely focused on their food and their leisure activities, and the reader is not invited to join them. Additionally, the article goes into much detail on the family living in Greenbelt, informing the reader on Mr. Bradford's education, his life and career choices up to that point, his job and income, and the fact this his wife is a first generation Scandinavian immigrant. Hardly any information is provided on Mr. Lewis who owns the Dow home. The reader can only gauge from the images that Mr. Lewis is apparently married and has at least two children (the one

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shown in Figure 1.3, and a toddler as indicated by the presence of the stroller in Figure 1.2). Unlike Mr. Bradford, Mr. Lewis is never seen, and his wife’s face is also obscured in Figure 1.3. This lack of information on Mr. Lewis enables the reader to imagine himself in his place.



Figure 1.4: The Bradfords, living in Greenbelt, are never depicted facing the reader, which gives them the appearance of being closed-off.

The home of Mr. Lewis and his family is not the only Dow home introduced within the article which also features a home twenty times as expensive as the \$2,500 construction – that of James Pardee, who was Board Chairman at a sizable chemical company. Just as the cheaper Dow home had been shown from both the outside as well as the inside, so was this house. The difference in outside appearance is already striking (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5: LIFE’s editorial staff chose to show the Pardee’s home from further away, thereby emphasizing its isolated location and its size.

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Unlike Mr. Lewis’ house, it is situated on a carefully manicured lawn with well positioned trees and shrubbery. No mention is made of its insulation or the presence of modern appliances. This is unnecessary, because with a house in this price range, the reader can assume for himself that Mrs. Pardee’s kitchen appliances should be up-to-date. The most obvious difference between these two houses is size, and this becomes particularly clear with the image taken within the Pardees’ living room (Figure 1.6).



Figure 1.6: The image of the Pardees’ living room creates distance to the viewer which is increased by the choice to photograph the couple from below.

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This image takes up a whole page within the article, thus taking up even more page space than the aerial shot of Greenbelt. The chosen perspective – photographed upwards from the ground – makes the room appear even more spacious, creating distance to the Pardees. It also causes the reader to look up at the Pardees who are able to afford a house this modern and large. Height and width of the room appear even grander due to the floor-to-ceiling windows. It appears as if the whole house of Mr. Lewis could fit into the Pardees’ living room. However, the purpose of showing the Pardees’ house right next to the Lewis’ house is not to belittle the latter. Rather, by showing its readers two homes so far apart with regard to price, *LIFE* implies the possibilities inherent in building one’s own home. It seems to be telling its readers whose average incomes – as discussed in the introduction - can be expected to range above that of Mr. Lewis but below that of Mr. Pardee, that they can afford to build their own homes which, in size, comfort and amenities, range somewhere in between these two homes. This suggests potential upward mobility, even though very few can afford the Pardee house. The notion of mobility is further underscored by the fact that the Pardees are considerably older than the Lewis family. This may well imply that Mr. Lewis still has some time to move up in the world.

“Electrified to the hilt”

When describing the Greenbelt homes, *LIFE*’s authors had underscored how these houses were “electrified to the hilt”, and electricity played a major role in most discourses on homeownership (and modern housing in general) throughout the 1930s. In its December 13, 1937 issue, *LIFE* displayed pictures taken in a so-called “Wonder House” which had been constructed by Consolidated Edison, a New York City power company. Each picture taken focused on a different room in a house to show the far-reaching effects of electrification. This ranged from an automatic overhead light at the doorway over illuminated wall niches in the living room to show off flowers or sculptures, and it included an electric alarm clock as well as an electric window opener in the bedroom. In the nursery, a photoelectric beam would set off a buzzer when the baby tried to climb out of its crib. More examples are displayed in Figure 1.7 below. Which images were taken by *LIFE* to illustrate the advantages of a modern and electrified home deserves some attention, for these images showcase the supposed life led by those who could afford such homes. The first image points out how visitors are greeted by a light at the doorway, implying that owners of a modern and electrified home liked to entertain, a suggestion found in *LIFE Magazine* throughout its publication period.¹⁶ The lighted handrails for late homecomers may point to a busy social life of the homeowning

¹⁶ See, in particular, figures included and discussed in chapters 3 and 5.

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couple, or hint at a hardworking husband who returns home late from the office where he provides for his family. The illuminated wall niches provide an opportunity to show off one’s good taste and wealth to one’s visitors. Finally, the spacious bathtub with lighting catering to one’s vanity is a particularly strong indicator that the “Wonder House” – unlike a vast proportion of American houses at the time – not only provided plumbing, but also boasted modern and spacious bathrooms.

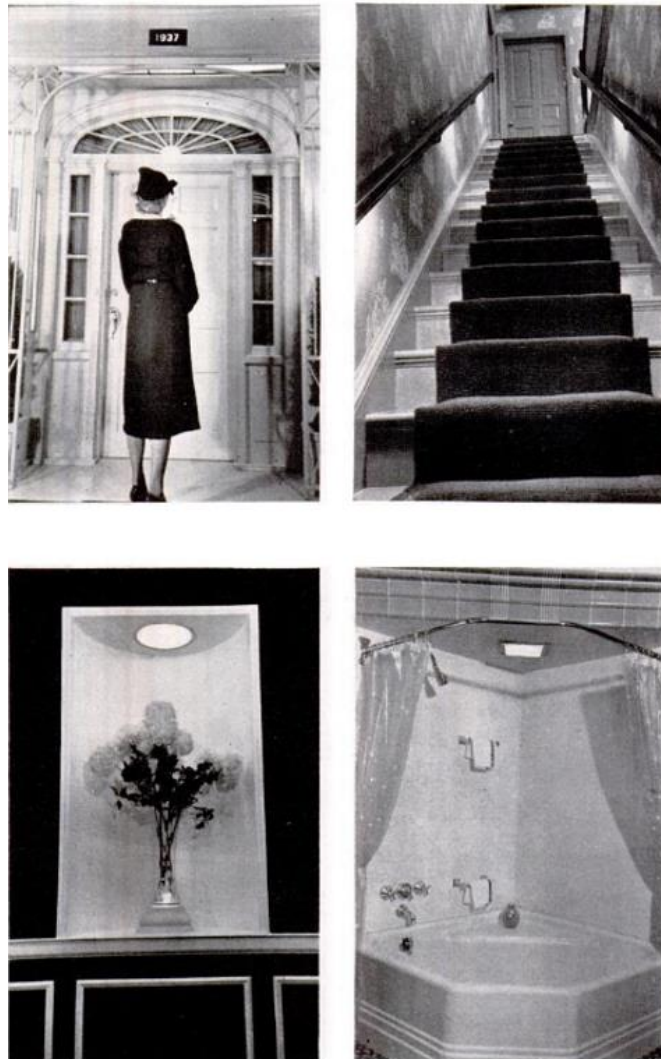


Figure 1.7: Note the captions underneath the images – they cater to both the homeowner’s pride as well as his vanity.

The “Wonder House” was not the only one of its kind. Electricity companies and furniture stores collaborated with contractors and the federal loan bureaus across the country to build sample modern homes or “Homes of Tomorrow”. These houses were open daily for interested Americans to come in and see for themselves the comforts possible to attain through building and buying new homes. One example for such a house can be found in the *Salt Lake Tribune* issue from June 2, 1935. Here, a whole page was dedicated to the “Home of

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Today”, an “up-to-the-minute, 7-room, cinder-concrete and steel, air-conditioned home of modern architecture” (“Visit the Home of Today”). One ad on the page for the *Utah Power and Light Company* exclaimed, “A visit to this home conveys the real meaning of release from household drudgery” through electricity (“Visit the Home of Today”). Another such house had opened in Mansfield, Wisconsin in February 1934. This “home of the future” had been “more completely electrified than ever before” which gave it the capacity of 864 servants according to the Company’s engineers (“Model House of Future is Before Public”). Such a large number of servants evokes images of the large plantations of the South, thus implying that owners of well electrified homes may live a life of grandeur reminiscent of that of the (romanticized) Southern plantation owners.¹⁷

The advertisement shown below (Figure 1.8) is typical of electrical appliances ads of the 1930s. For one, it conveys an image of appliances as servants, referring to electricity as “Your tireless servant”. It also encourages people to use more electricity, because “the more of it you use the cheaper it gets”. This ties in smoothly with *LIFE*’s call on homeowners to consume whenever they can. The reference to electricity as a servant is underscored by the depiction of the robot in the middle, which is black, thus including a component of race. This underscores statements that African Americans were only ever included in *LIFE*’s projections of homeownership in the role of maids, nannies or cooks, never as homeowners themselves.

The text of the advertisement requires additional attention. It refers to “Electricity” (capitalized) not only as a “modern, economical servant” but also as a way to get “full value out of your home”. To suggest that making full use of electricity equals getting one’s home’s full value implies that an electrified lifestyle is part of homeownership. Furthermore, by using the term “value” the advertisement suggests that one should install electrical appliances to fully qualify one’s home as a sound investment.

¹⁷ The popularity of the 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind* and its subsequent release as a movie in 1939, suggest how plantation life was romanticized at the time while the horrors of slavery were downplayed.

PAGE EIGHT



Your Tireless Servant
for only a few cents a day!

You are not getting full value out of your home if you are not making full use of Electricity, the modern, economical servant. It can relieve much of the drudgery of housework . . . increase the convenience of your home . . . and double the comfort of your home if you will allow it to do so. And, strangely enough, the more of it you use the cheaper it gets. It offers you a short-cut route to fuller home enjoyment, saving you money as well. Are you making full use of its many possibilities?

ELECTRICITY IS YOUR CHEAPEST SERVANT!

It saves
time, energy
and money!



There's no
limit to
its uses!

Hot Point Electric Ranges
General Electric Table Appliances
Thor Washing Machines Thor Ironers
Eldredge Electric Sewing Machines
General Electric Refrigerators
Gibson Electric Refrigerators
Zenith, RCA-Victor, General Electric Radios

Make Your Selection Today
and We Will Hold Any Item for You Until Christmas.

Northern Commercial Co.

Figure 1.8: LIFE was not alone in equating modern household appliances with servants – a lot of advertisements of the time did the same. Note how the robotic servant is black, thus alluding to mostly African American household servants.

The amenities afforded by an electrified lifestyle soon became synonymous with homeownership. All articles dealing with building one's own home – in *LIFE* as well as daily

newspapers I examined - advised their readers to pay special attention to placing electrical outlets, and most of them made sure to mention an increase in leisure time afforded by modern ovens and electric washing machines. Up until the 1930s, middle-class apartment buildings in the big cities (particularly buildings such as the Stuyvesant in New York) had boasted modern amenities to a much larger degree than homes occupied by owners (Klimasmith 130-33). Some of the older homes that had been erected in the newly formed suburbs of the 1920s were as dilapidated as the tenements in the cities, regardless of whether they were owner- or renter-occupied. Harold Aron, realty lawyer, was quoted in 1937 suggesting that “few persons have concerned themselves with the ‘less sensational but more general and deplorable condition’ in the small-home field” (“Suburbs Favored for Model Homes”). All of this, according to media of the day, was to change now. One 1938 article assured its readers that newly constructed single-family homes offered “all of the conveniences to be found in modern apartment homes” (Kirk). And while apartment homes in some instances provided concierge services, the suburban homeowners could afford domestic servants for a few cents per day, according to advertisements by power companies: “Electricity is your cheapest servant; use it more freely” (C.P. & L.). This is not only a call on people to only consume energy; it also invites the purchase of devices that use electricity. The same can be said for the advertisement discussed above (Figure 1.8) which included images of various devices to be used (after having been purchased) at home.

The *Sterling Daily Gazette* exclaimed that “Today’s Houses Would Make Dear Grandma Green with Envy” thanks to advances in technology, particularly with regard to the electrification of the home (“New Home Should be Constructed for Years to Come”). This, according to the article, was to be kept in mind when building oneself a new home:

The surest way to build an up-to-date house is to include in its construction all the necessary and modern gadgets such as insulation, air conditioning, modern plumbing, well devised kitchen, plenty of electrical outlets for appliances etc. (“New Home Should Be Constructed for Years to Come”)

In their issue from February of 1938, the *Journal of Home Economics* provided important Do’s and Don’ts for the first-time homebuilder, which included building only on “land with a future” and providing “enough electric outlets and switches” (“If I Ever Build Again”). *LIFE* suggested that even houses not much older than a decade, were no longer up to date: “People do not realize that progress in technology and design since 1926 has made the 1938-model

house, as well as the 1938-model automobile, not only cheaper but also far better than the 1926 model” (“Eight Houses...” 45).

Advertising for the electrified home generally addressed women in particular by suggesting that electricity would make the housewife’s chores easier. The Texas Power and Light Company, for example, depicted two nicely dressed women enjoying dinner at a candlelit table, while the ad’s headline read “Let Electric Servants Bring You New Comfort and Conveniences”. The ad moved on to suggest that the woman in an electrified home could “save hundreds of steps and have glorious hours of new freedom” (Texas Power and Light Company). The Iowa Nebraska Light and Power Company ran an advertisement depicting a wedding scene. Instead of a human preacher, the drawing featured a mirror asking the groom to promise “to love, honor and provide this woman with the electric work-savers to preserve her youth and beauty” (see Figure 1.9). Below the image, the ad elaborated how “Wedding vows were never meant to mean a bride in June and a servant in September. Romance lives when drudgery dies” (Iowa Nebraska Light and Power Company). The ad suggests that the purchase of a modern home with electrical appliances guaranteed a long and happy marriage with a wife who managed to preserve her beauty and charms for years to come. Any woman with “electricity at her command” could go “about her work light hearted and free from worry, with time for leisure and recreation” (Eichmann).¹⁸ This focus on relaxation and beauty could also be found in *LIFE*’s portrayal of the “Wonder House” which had pointed to the positive side effects of modern lighting within the bathroom: “a glowing overhead light bathes the body beautiful as it reclines in the tub” (See Figure 1.7): While appliances allowed for the preservation of the wife’s beauty, the right lighting served to show it off – much like the lighted wall niches within the “Wonder House” were praised by *LIFE* for serving to show off objects of art.

¹⁸ Other electricity companies’ advertisements sought to convince the reader that “[t]he electrified home is more than a place in which to live. It is a place in which to *enjoy* living” (Utah Power & Light Company), and that “No family need deny itself the benefits of electrical appliances” (Wisconsin Public Service Corporation).

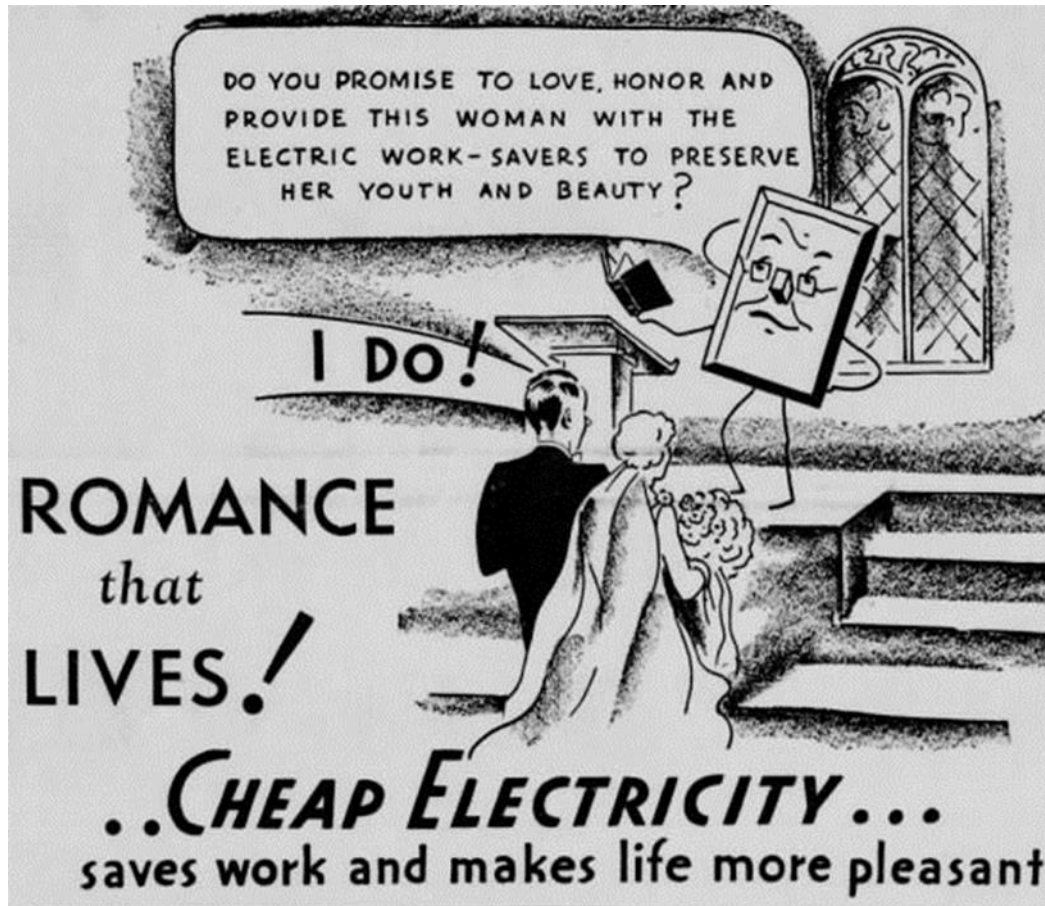


Figure 1.9: In addition to the aforementioned servant rhetoric, advertisements for household appliances were often particularly gendered; suggesting that, in saving housewives from drudgery, they supposedly preserved their beauty.

Houses for “Modern Living”

In its September 26, 1938 issue, *LIFE* took up some of the main arguments it had advanced in “American Housing: A Failure, a Problem, a Potential Boon and Boom” using almost the exact phrases as before in its attempts to convince its readership that private construction was the best means to combat the Depression while also partaking in “modern living”. The article “Eight Houses for Modern Living” carried almost the same key message as the earlier article on American housing: supposedly, a large number of people could in fact afford to become homeowners, or to upgrade from the home they now owned without government assistance.

Entirely aside from the ‘ill-housed third of the nation’ who cannot afford to live in decent houses, there are hundreds of thousands of renters who could afford to build homes of their own, hundreds of thousands of owners who could afford to build better houses than they now have. (“Eight Houses for Modern Living” 45)

Within this article, the authors provide examples of privately constructed homes for families whose incomes ranged between \$2,000 and \$10,000 per year. Those incomes allowed the families to purchase homes priced in between the \$2,500 home of Mr. Lewis and his family and that of Mr. Pardee and his wife from the 1937 “American Housing...”. The article sets out by introducing each family as well as mentioning a few facts about the families’ current living quarters and their desires for improvement: “The children sleep in a room barely big enough for two beds” (46), “the water heater is uncomfortably close to the stove [...] the dining room is too large and the living room is too small” (47), or “the Smiths feel crowded in their two bathrooms” (57). Considering that the Smiths have two bathrooms in times when a considerable proportion of American homes had no inside access to plumbing, these families should not be considered average. Of the four families featured, two rented their current homes, while the other two were already homeowners. The number of children as well as the children’s ages varied, so that readers were bound to recognize themselves in one of the families featured. To each family, two architects were assigned to present one “modern” and one “traditional” house design. These designs not only presented solutions to the problems that each family currently experienced with their home, but also fulfilled certain wishes and desires voiced by the family members, while also addressing comfort: “all rooms are of generous size and well-exposed for light and cross ventilation” (52), “The badminton court which the Calverts asked for has an ideal north-south direction” (54), and “each bedroom is a bedroom-sleeping porch combination divided by folding doors. Each one has its private terrace” (64). These examples convey *LIFE*’s key message regarding the construction of one’s own, up-to-date home: the “modern living” these homes afford equals comfortable living for the whole family.

Each housing design was showcased on a double page (Figure 1.10), providing detailed sketches of the home’s appearance from front and the rear, as well as an illustrated floor plan. The figures featured within these floor plans were always faceless. Thus, the reader could effortlessly picture himself and his family within the house. Each design was accompanied by a brief text to underscore the design’s selling points and advantages, but the composition of the double page clearly put the drawings into focus.

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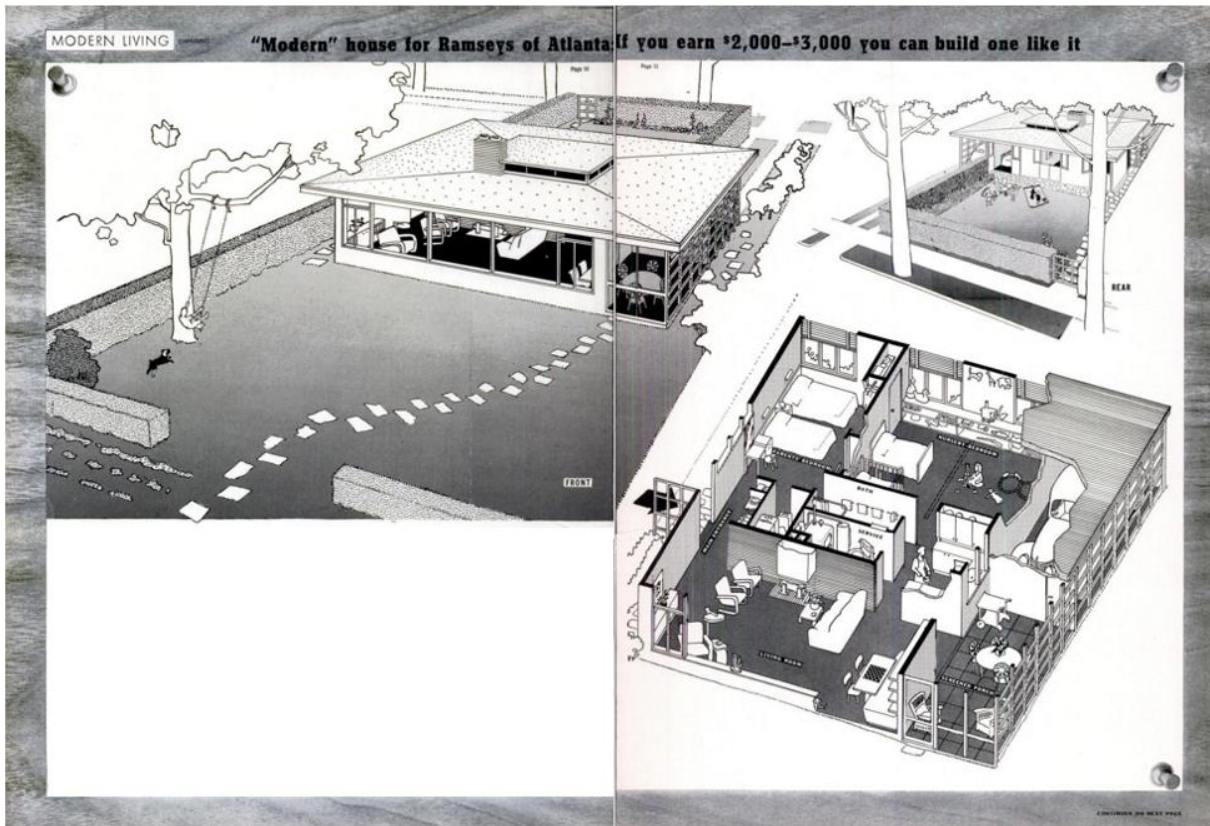


Figure 1.10: Each design of the “Eight Houses for modern living” included “you can build one like it” in its headline, thereby encouraging LIFE readers to consider building a new and modern home for themselves.

Special attention should be paid to one important detail: the headline for each design was the same with the exception of a minor detail: income. As illustrated within Figure 1.10, the headline read “If you earn \$2,000 - \$3,000 you can build one like it”. The headline for each design followed the same sentence construction: “If you earn [income range], you can build one like it.” Stating the limiting income range first tends to de-emphasize it while focusing attention instead upon the prospect that the reader “can build one like it.”

On the article’s last page, the authors offered “facts about financing a house” (66). Here, they advised readers not to buy home priced higher than two to two-and-a-half yearly incomes of the family. It also provided a table of expected monthly interest and principal payments once a loan was taken out to purchase a house, assuring readers: “[you] pay off the loan like rent”. These loans, the brief text explained, could be taken out at a variety of places: local building and loan associations, banks, insurance agencies, and other lending institutions.

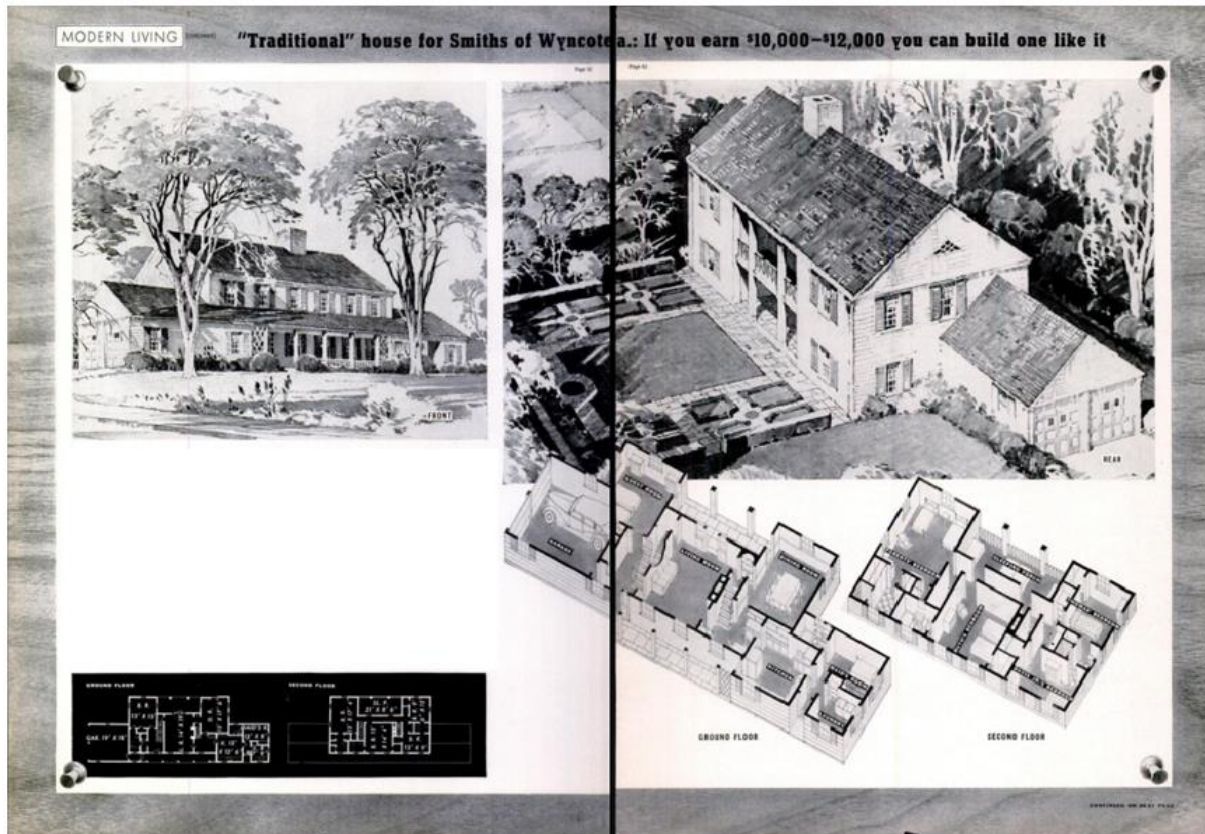


Figure 1.11: The “Eight Houses for Modern Living” were divided into “modern” and “traditional” designs. Clearly, the intention was to appeal to as many readers as possible.

The authors began their article by complaining that “there are no great corporations which manufacture and sell complete houses and hence there is no national advertising to make people want new houses” (45). This was a misleading statement. While research of daily newspapers published across the nation suggests that there were no builders advertising on a national scale, home construction was dominated by large real estate contractors, so-called “Operative Builders” purchased land, constructed homes and engaged in selling these homes.¹⁹ The reason behind the lack of a national advertising campaign may have been that these builders generally operated regionally. Loan agencies’ advertisements were much more prevalent than builders’ advertisements throughout newspapers, calling on Americans to go

¹⁹ In a 1939 *Collier's* article the author identified these operative builders as successors to the “speculative” builders of the 1920s (Flynn: 13). According to the article, government agencies were much less critical of these operative builders and they were convinced that these builders had to be lured into the low-price field – otherwise, homes could not be built at the numbers required. The Technical Division of the Federal Housing Administration undertook various steps in educating operative builders about the possibilities of low-cost homes. These steps included participation of FHA officials in meetings of local groups of operative builders “to impress upon them the vast magnitude of the market for low-priced houses and the opportunities which await their success in producing them” (“Public Demands Low Cost Homes”). These measures yielded results; by 1937, operative builders were “conspicuous in the home-building field over several fronts this year” (“Builders Busy”). While some sources watched wearily as operative builders built away, others focused solely on the fact that this would enable great numbers of Americans to purchase these homes and thus finally partake in the economic recovery process.

out and buy their own home. This can be traced back to New Deal measures: In 1938, amendments to the National Housing Act lowered the required down payments on homes valued at \$6,000 or less to 10% (“New Mortgage Plan Only for Home Occupant”).²⁰ In addition, throughout the country, 13,000 lending agencies were established so that people could easily receive information on the possibilities of purchasing their own homes and familiarize themselves with the “comparatively simple procedure now available for acquiring” a home (“Ownership of Home is Made Easy”). The *Journal of Home Economics* pointed out to its readers: “Because of their flexibility, the various plans offered cover practically anyone’s requirements [...] Your money will produce more today than it ever would before [...] more utility, substance, and comfort” (Tuomey: 147).

Advertisements for savings and loan associations reflected the arguments advanced in *LIFE*. They also linked loan payments to rent payments, thus implying one need not necessarily incur higher monthly expenses when buying a home as opposed to renting one. Just as the *LIFE* article did, these advertisements left out that there were indeed additional costs attached to homeownership such as taxes, insurance, upkeep, fuel and utilities, which a majority of apartments included in their rent payments (Stewart). This is illustrated within the two images below (1.12, 1.13).

The advertisement for the Citizens Federal Savings and Loan Association was printed in a January 1937 issue of *The Times* of Hammond, Indiana. Its message is almost exactly the same as the message conveyed within the *LIFE* article on modern living: the home included in the ad is a small but modern house, and the sub-headline “You C-a-n Build!” echoes the headline featured above each housing design within the *LIFE* piece. The ad suggests to readers that buying a home is an easy and safe step to take: “It never has been easier – safer! – to build and finance a home than now”. This is further underscored by the main headline: “By the federal way...” which plays with the phrase “by the way”, suggesting that it is in fact not a big deal to be buying a house with federal loans.

²⁰Such easy down payment options applied to homes only. President Roosevelt suggested that “in the interest of prosperity”, down payment on other expensive items, such as cars, should generally be more than 33% of the overall value. Reactions to this were mixed; while some people suggested that this was unfair to some of America’s industries, others expressed the hope that such a policy could serve well in “discouraging restlessness in all Americans” (Carter).

**By the
FEDERAL WAY . . .**

On Direct Reduction Plans

LOANS *for*
New Home Construction



You C-a-n Build!

It never has been easier—
safer!—to build and finance a
Home than now—by our
plan. This institution now
provides home-builders the
longest term, lowest cost,
most easily paid-off type of
Home Loans. Less cash need-
ed, now, to start. Lowest
ever payments during the
life of the Loan. Ask for
facts.


**Calumet City
People Are
Included, Too.**

**CITIZENS FEDERAL SAVINGS
AND LOAN ASSOCIATION**

5256 Hohman — Phone Hammond 320

Figure 1.12: This ad implies that buying a home can almost be done “by the way” without much hassle at all.

Security of investments was a crucial issue, found in most loan advertisements of the time. This is also illustrated by the following advertisement (Figure 1.13). This ad not only consisted of a payment plan to illustrate the rent-like structure of monthly loan payments, but also called on potential customers to use the loan offer for “happy and secure home ownership”, suggesting that the mass foreclosures of homes throughout the Depression were a thing of the past.



ANNOUNCEMENT

In order to give the home owner or buyer a modern home financing plan the Edwardsville Loan Association has adopted and makes available to those desiring it—

The Direct Reduction Home Loan Plan.

Interest Payments Smaller Each Month				
\$10.00 monthly payment, 1 year, 7 month loan, interest 6%				
Month	Payment	Interest	Principal Reduction	Balance
1	\$10.00	4.98	5.02	\$895.00
2	10.00	4.95	5.05	889.98
3	10.00	4.92	5.08	884.93
4	10.00	4.90	5.10	879.85
5	10.00	4.87	5.13	874.75
6	10.00	4.85	5.15	869.62
7	10.00	4.82	5.18	864.47
8	10.00	4.80	5.20	859.29
9	10.00	4.77	5.23	854.09
10	10.00	4.74	5.26	848.86
11	10.00	4.72	5.28	843.60
12	10.00	4.72	5.28	838.32
Total	\$120.00	\$58.32	\$61.68	

The table shows how interest payments become smaller each month, how your loan is gradually cancelled, with our new low-cost, long-term home payment plan.

There are no year-to-year service fees or other extra charges to pay after your loan is made. All necessary costs are covered at the beginning!

Every family can understand this simple plan of paying for home buying, building, modernizing, or refinancing a present mortgage in rent-size payments.

You know exactly where you stand at any time, how much you owe, how much you must pay, exactly when your home will be clear.

This modern way to pay for your home assures maximum convenience, economy and safety.

Use it for happy and secure home ownership. Come in for complete details, without obligation. Learn how this new low-cost home payment plan can be made to fit your income.

Loans At Once to Buy, Build, Modernize, Repair, Refinance

HOME FINANCING *Guaranteed*
TO MODERN TIMES

Edwardsville Loan Association

Second Floor
EDWARDSVILLE NATIONAL BANK BUILDING
EDWARDSVILLE, ILLINOIS

Figure 1.13: In an effort to convince Americans that loans were in fact “simple” and “safe”, many advertisements included sample payment plan tables.

In the months following its first introduction of the “LIFE Houses”, *LIFE* continued to feature them in various articles. In their issue of March 20, 1939, *LIFE* presented landscaping and gardening ideas to be applied to the different house plans previously introduced. This implies an assumption by the editors that readers were taking an interest in the homes and were actively considering having them constructed. Surrounded by colorful drawings, the text proudly announced that “up to date, dozens of *LIFE* houses are either built or building.” (“LIFE Presents Landscapes and a Garden Calendar...” 24). In their issue from April 3, 1939, the magazine announced that more than 40,000 people in the United States had purchased exact miniature models of these homes, supposedly because they were intending to build them for themselves eventually (“Isn’t This the Way to Handle Dreams?” 13). The article featured the picture of a young couple gazing fondly at one of these model homes,

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clearly dreaming to have it built for their budding family (Figure 1.14). A significant feature of the image is the overall composition of the couple and the home, which fit together in somewhat of a heart shape. Putting their heads closely together, husband and wife are united in their dream of building and inhabiting their own home. Note how gender matters: the wife is intently listening to the explanations of her husband. The composition suggests that happy and strong relationships, built on the foundation of traditional gender concepts (the husband talking, the wife listening), are fostered by homeownership. The facial expressions of happy anticipation suggest hopefulness – it is quite possible to turn this dream into reality. The chosen perspective is also noteworthy – since the couple is supposedly looking down at a model of their dream home, the prospect of building one’s own home seems a lot less daunting than it would appear if they stood before a real-sized house which would loom over them. By including a model in the picture, reaching homeownership status appears as easy to achieve as assembling a dollhouse.



Figure 1.14: In choosing to show a couple gazing at a mere model of their potential house, *LIFE*’s editors imply that reaching homeownership status may be as easy to achieve as assembling a doll house.

In July of 1940, *LIFE* magazine introduced eight more housing plans. This time, the authors paid special attention to the actual construction of the homes. Planned for yearly incomes between \$1,800 and \$6,000, the homes were constructed in 27 states and “Fifty-one of those completed were furnished for show purposes by 37 department and furniture stores”

(“LIFE Houses” 77). The article pointed out that at the time of publication, dozens of these homes, which were open to the public, had already been sold. The text, therefore, seems to serve as an advertisement to entice readers to snatch up the remaining homes before they are gone.

While the first installment of the *LIFE* houses had closed out with brief advice on financing homeownership, the second article started out with encouragement for potential homebuilders and buyers who might be uncertain of the financial risks involved: “Today the Federal Housing Administration mortgage terms are so lenient and interest rates so low that it is easier to finance a house than it ever has been before” (“LIFE Houses” 77). Not only was the purchase of a home praised as being easy, it was also suggested to be a good investment: “Today a good house is a sound hedge against a possibility of wartime inflation” (“LIFE Houses” 77). So, not only was the purchase of one’s own modern home portrayed as risk-free, it was recommended as a good decision to fend off economic crises. In contrast to the aspects of modernity ascribed to these current homes, the desire to own one’s own home was depicted as something inherent in human nature: “slowly but traceably, American families are beginning to move away from crowded cities [...] to satisfy their primal urge to live in a space of their own, in a home of their own” (“LIFE Houses” 77).²¹ By suggesting that the desire for homeownership was instinctive, the authors implied that not owning a home was contrary to human nature.

LIFE was not alone in advertising new ideas in housing. Various papers dedicated whole pages to floor plans of modern homes. For those who could not buy a whole new house, papers provided tips for updating presently-owned homes to adapt them to a modern lifestyle (thus further pushing for consumerism). These articles were far less emotional than those in *LIFE*. In addition, they were generally simple floor plans that did not feature furniture, landscaping, and a background story about the family about to move in to the house. In contrast to *LIFE*, these floor plans were focused on affordability. Such a home, according to its accompanying headline, was “Planned for Economy”, “Commendably Simple”, or a “Model for Modest Income” (Figure 1.15). Yet, despite the simplicity in room arrangement,

²¹ This theme that homeownership was in a person’s nature was expounded upon by other sources as well. Other papers advocated the “natural instinct for a family to own its own home” (“Such a Little Gem of a House”). Others indicated that it would make you a better person: “Home ownership stamps an individual as a man of character” (“Home Ownership Puts Stamp on Character”).

all of these homes possessed “all of the necessities of a comfortable soundly constructed home” (“Planned for Economy”).²²

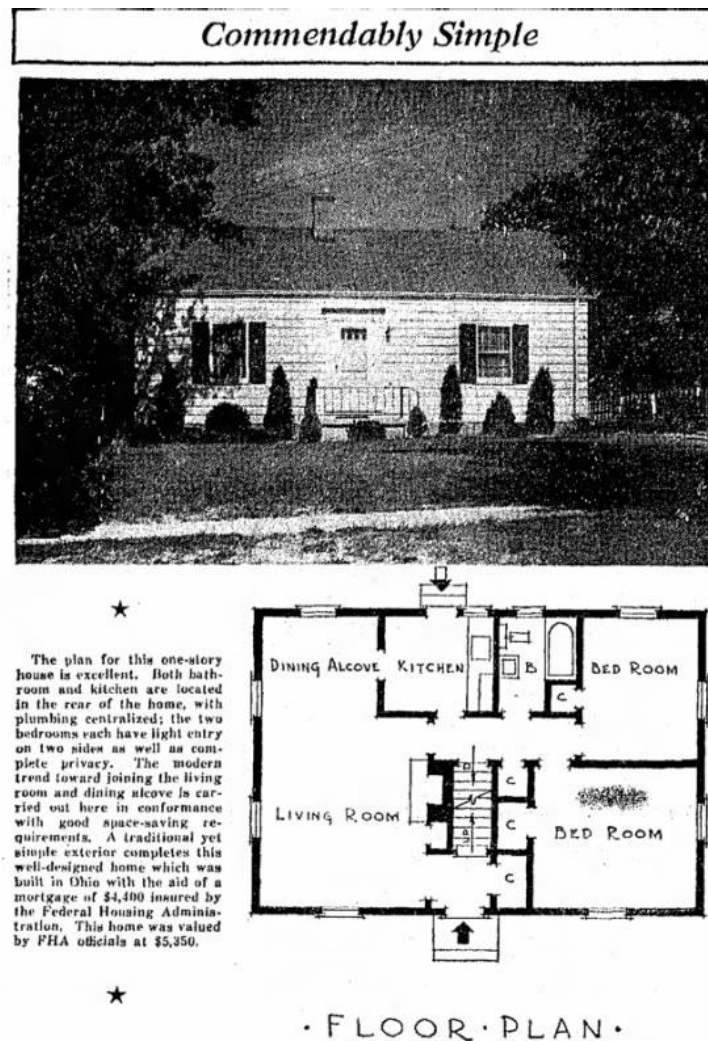


Figure 1.15: In contrast to *LIFE*'s more intricate designs, many daily newspapers praised home designs for their “simplicity” and “affordability”. Keep in mind that newspapers generally had a much lower-income readership than magazines.

Homeowners in Rural Areas

By the time of the 1940 Census, less than half of the suburbs' inhabitants were homeowners. Of the American farmers, slightly more than half (53.4%) owned their home and soil (Truesdell 3-4). Yet, despite the fact that the majority of homeowners were to be found in rural areas and on American farms, homeownership projected in *LIFE* throughout the late 1930s and around 1940 was generally situated in suburban areas. A review of all

²² The floor plans thus introduced were not singular to one respective paper. All of the plans mentioned here, along with the identical headlines and texts, were printed in papers throughout the United States. The “Planned For Economy” plan, for example, was not only published in the *Anniston Star* (Alabama) in June 1939, but also, among other publications, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* in Iowa (April 15, 1939), the *Reading Times* in Pennsylvania (April 29, 1939), the *Ogden Standard-Examiner* in Utah (October 1, 1939), and the *Paris News* in Texas (May 3, 1939).

issues of *LIFE* from 1936–1972 revealed only one article dealing with rural homeownership, an article entitled “A Small Town’s Saturday Night”, published in the *LIFE* issue from December 2, 1940. Its main focus was not homeownership per se but rather a depiction of “typical” American rural life. The article’s authors invited the reader to take a stroll with them around Franklin, Indiana, on a Saturday evening to witness “this joyous native phenomenon” (“A Small Town’s Saturday Night” 63). The article’s perspective is chosen so that both photographer and reader accompany one family from the area into town on Saturday night: the Dunns, who own a farm outside of Franklin and who are the only farmers featured as homeowners in *LIFE* in the late 1930s. While the family was described throughout the article as a typical farm family from the area, the Dunns must have been doing exceptionally well: The *Real Property Inventory* had criticized the particularly bad condition of rural housing, but this did not apply to the Dunns’ house. The article points out that the home features a telephone as well as a bath, and the image chosen to illustrate the farm (Figure 1.16) provides a glimpse of both the family car as well as an electricity line. This is significant, as electrification in rural areas was considerably lagging behind the electrification of urban and suburban homes. Even among the farms in New York State and comparably non-remote rural areas, electrified farm homes were not the norm in the late 1930s: In July 1936, a *New York Times* article still counted 112,855 non-electrified farms in New York State, amounting to an electrification rate of approximately 45% for rural New York (“Farm Power Loans Reach \$42,000,000”).²³

²³ Electricity companies had lost interest in the relatively expensive process of electrifying rural areas, as farmers were found to be primarily interested in electricity for domestic use, while foregoing the much more consuming use for farm machinery (Wolfe). Yet, particularly proponents of the Country Life Movement imagined the creation of an “electrical utopia on the farm to match city comforts” (Kline: 356). As a result, it was hoped, the migration movement from farms to cities would decline: “electrification on the farm would tend to change the tide of migration from rural areas to the cities” claimed one speaker at a meeting of a local Kiwanis club chapter in Frederick, Maryland, thus voicing a prominent opinion of his time (“Rural Electrification Subject of Speaker”). To speed up the electrification process in rural America, President Roosevelt had created the Rural Electrification Administration (REA) in May, 1935. This Administration was to “initiate, formulate, administer, and supervise a program of approved projects with respect to the generation, transmission, and distribution of electric energy in rural areas” (qtd. in Person: 70). The REA was to achieve these goals by offering interest-bearing loans with repayment periods of 25 years to power organizations.

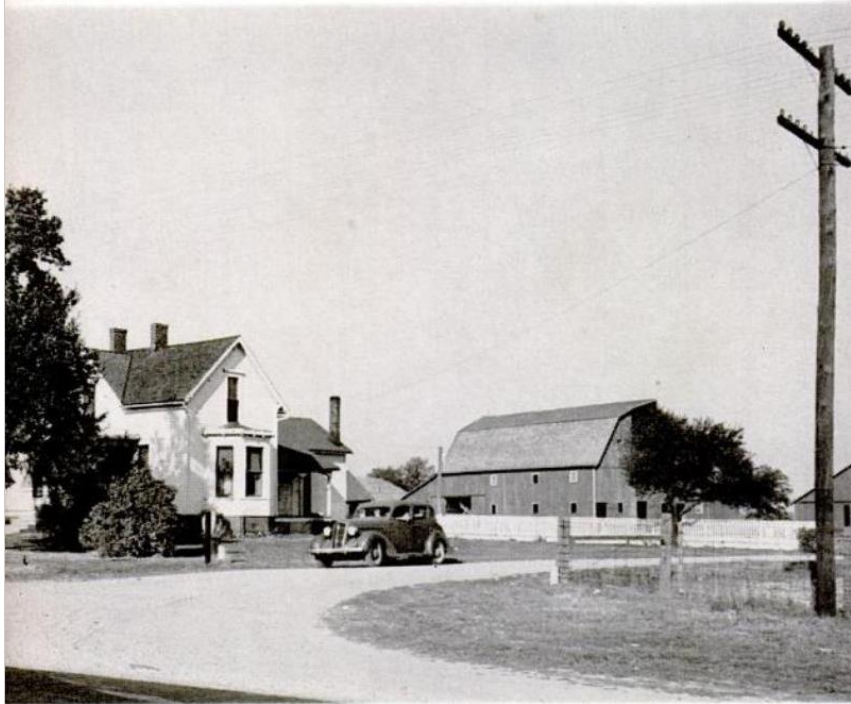


Figure 1.16: The Dunn's farmhouse had access to electricity. While *LIFE* did not mention this, that was not common for farm houses of the time.

In addition to modern amenities comparable to those available within modern suburban homes, the Dunns also earned “disposable income” to be spent in the neighboring town on their Saturday night out and send their oldest child to the town’s small Baptist college. This deserves attention as “disposable income” was a hotly debated feature of American farm owners at the time. The Roosevelt administration not only financed suburban housing projects such as Greenbelt or urban slum clearance projects, but also created the Resettlement Administration (R.A.) which was particularly active in rural regions (Schuyler). The downturn of the farm economy after the First World War had resulted in rising farm tenancy rates “to levels that deeply troubled many observers” (Rasmussen, Chris 85). Of these rural housing programs, almost all aimed at preserving or creating farmownership rather than lowering rents. The so-called “subsistence homesteads” are one example: in these cases, homes were built on small tracts of land which gave families ample room to raise their own food. Families were given twenty (in some cases thirty) years to pay off loans and thus purchase the homes they occupied (Ramsey 101). There were different target groups for this program: former tenant farmers, unemployed miners, or part-time industrial workers. In contrast to the Greenbelt project, African Americans were also deemed suitable for this program (Zeuch 712). The homes on the homestead lots were generally valued between

\$2,500 and \$3,500, including land and equipment, which placed their value well below that of suburban homes in Greenbelt and comparable developments.²⁴

The R.A. programs aimed at turning farm tenants into farm owners were justified with the argument that farm owners – as opposed to tenants – had disposable income to be spent which would in turn strengthen the national economy. This departs from earlier representations of farm ownership: in the early twentieth century, it was argued that farm owners took better care of their soil than tenants.²⁵ However, in 1936, the R.A. regional director for Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas pointed out:

Still there are more than 2,000,000 farm-tenant families in the Cotton Belt whose purchasing power is now confined to the barest necessities of life. How to build up that purchasing power and the health of the tenant population and through careful supervision to lead them to eventual farm ownership is the problem. (Quoted in “Farm Migration Burdening West” 15)

So, by the 1930s, farm owners were no longer praised primarily for their responsible care of the soil but rather for the ability to partake in consumerism. “Purchasing power” was mentioned before “health” clearly indicating priorities. The importance in fostering people’s purchasing power was underlined by Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins when he explained in an article for the *New York Times*: “If we are to maintain a healthy economic and thriving

²⁴ The idea of resettling the destitute on farmland had been popular earlier in the twentieth century. In the 1910s, urban issues had been sought to be resolved by relocating first generation immigrants into the American countryside, following the belief that “the problem of the immigrant is largely industrial. Its essence lies in the concentration of incoming foreigners in urban and industrial centers” (Cance: 69). Organizations such as the *North American Civic League for Immigrants* devoted themselves to solving this problem by luring immigrants into rural areas and assisting them in becoming farmowners so that they gained a stake in the country (“Making American Farmers of Italian Immigrants”). The story of the immigrant turned farm-/homeowner and thus a successful American citizen, became a popular theme not only in the socio-economic discourse, but also in literature of the time. This lasted well into the 1930s. One example of this is the novel *American Beauty* by Edna Ferber. First published in 1931, it followed self-made millionaire True Baldwin from Chicago to his hometown in Connecticut where he was raised on a farm. Driving around the area with his daughter Candice, the pair notices how “the Poles seem to have bought up a lot of the old places” (8). These Polish immigrants, supposedly, “loved the land with the ardour of born farmers who come from a country where land has always been scarce and precious” (67) Ferber’s book was not the only one dealing with immigrant farm owners along the East Coast; others included Francis Allen’s *The Invaders* (1913), Edith Miniter’s *Our Natupski Neighbors* (1916), Cornelia Cannon’s *Heirs* (1930), Annette Esty’s *The Proud House* (1932), and Gladys Hasty Carroll’s *As the Earth Turns* (1933). Each of these novels features a “thorough and sensitive socio-cultural analysis of the Polish immigrant farmer” presenting him in a sympathetic light (Gladsky: 431). Throughout the books, these farmers are depicted as the Jeffersonian ideal: “industrious and thrifty, efficient and neat, self-sacrificing and self-reliant [...] They are made, in effect, to look like Yankees in Polish clothing” (Gladsky: 435).

²⁵ The Public Lands Commission of Theodore Roosevelt had bemoaned irresponsible herding practices by sheep ranchers in 1905: “These bands [of sheep] are often owned by men who have no ranches or regular range, and who have no interest in the country other than to make all the money they can while the opportunity lasts” (Public Lands Commission 18).

production, we need to maintain the standard of living of the lower-income groups in our population, who constitute 90 per cent of our purchasing power” (SM1). Telling the story of a thriving rural town through the eyes of a farmowning family in “A Small Town’s Saturday Night” clearly takes sides in the discussion about farm tenancy versus ownership. By implying that the Dunns were a typical farm family it was also implied that they represent many others.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the government’s efforts in making money more easily available to Americans, and even though *LIFE* suggested that people were happy with building homes and becoming homeowners, there was no considerable rise in private home construction and homeownership in the late 1930s. A considerable number of sources of the time blamed this on the construction industry. In a 1937 editorial for the *Chester Times*, journalist Roger W. Babson suggested: “the building supply concerns have had their finger in the pie. They have boosted material costs more than ten per cent since last September”. In addition, wages in the construction industry remained high despite considerable unemployment figures, which should have driven down wages. Babson blamed labor unions as well as the New Deal government for this as it had been paying unreasonable wages in its public construction programs. Overall, construction costs rose 16% between 1936 and 1937. Babson calculated that a house that cost \$5,000 in September 1936, would sell for \$5,800 in September 1937. Such an increase was felt particularly keenly by the lower middle classes who had been expected to play a big part in the expected building boom. By April 1937, material prices had gone back up close to prices from 1926 which had been the “highest level ever known” in U.S. history (“Sees Curtailment in Home Building”).

With costs as high as this, it was improbable that construction would reach output levels high enough to aide with the economic recovery: “[It] seems unlikely that there will be any appreciable rise in building work for the nation as a whole until costs are reduced or rents rise further to the point where it is profitable to build even at present cost levels” (Cooper, 1937).

The steady rise in construction costs was incorporated by loan associations into their advertisements, urging people to buy a new home now because “[the] price of realty is slowly but constantly increasing” (First Savings and Loan Company Massilon, Ohio), and any delay in buying even a small home “will only bring about increased real estate values and higher construction costs” (Union Mutual Building and Loan Association). Costs remained high

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throughout the following years, and in June, 1939 one article in *Harper's Monthly* admonished, “The building boom, so persistently predicted over the last decade, is not yet here and one of the main reasons for the delay is cost” (Rheinstein & Pringle 526). The article's authors blamed the high costs on high wages in the construction industry.

Two weeks later, *Collier's* followed suit and attempted an explanation for this: “With everybody wanting better and cheaper places to live, the building industry is too sick to do much about it” (Flynn 12). The article's author John Flynn put the blame much more at the doors of the construction industry's bosses and price-fixing agreements between them rather than labor unions: according to Flynn, building-materials dealers throughout the United States kept competition levels low and prices high. Dealers were organized in local councils. Members of these councils “fixed prices, regulated the trade and assigned territory to dealers” (13). Furthermore, independent materials dealers unwilling to join up were blacklisted. In the author's words, the Federal Trade Commission was at the time attempting to solve these issues by keeping up “an incessant warfare on the practices” (50). The article was published in June; in July, 1939, the U.S. Department of Justice launched its first nation-wide antitrust enforcement investigation focusing on the construction industry, employing more than 200 lawyers and commanding a budget of \$1,300,000 to do so. Assistant attorney general Thurman Arnold, who was in charge of this investigation, criticized the “ridiculous spectacle” that had to be stopped so as to solve “problems” which “appear at every level of the building industry” (Crider).

Over the following months, *The New York Times* covered the investigations in great detail, reporting on indictments and further progress. These indictments were not limited to the industry; they also targeted union leaders. The Department of Justice justified this approach by explaining that it would be “remiss if it proceeded only against unlawful restraints of trade on the part of manufacturers, contractors and dealers in building materials and ignored those practices by labor organizations” (Wood). In fact, certain practices by labor unions had been identified as warranting trial: to require the hiring of unnecessary labor, to prevent the use of cheaper material or modern equipment, to enforce illegally fixed prices, and the destruction of a legitimate system of collective bargaining (Berge 477). Quite a few cases were brought not only against the labor unions, but also against lumber dealers or plumbers associations. Most of these companies generally pleaded nolo contendere, paid a fine, and worked on developing “schemes which are less flagrant in contravening the law” (Loevinger 60). While the investigation by the Justice Department had some localized impact

here and there, it did not bring about long-term changes in the construction industry. After the end of World War II, the United States would again face a housing shortage, which was attributed to “the excessive cost of building” in 1947 (Loevinger 47). Two factors may have contributed to the meager results of the investigations. Firstly, it was difficult to enforce the decrees that had been decided upon during the investigation and in the subsequent trials: “There is no machinery for adequate enforcement of decrees and we must rely entirely upon complaints of decree violation” (Berge 469). Secondly, the unfolding of World War II, particularly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, shifted attention away from the single family home: materials and labor force were now marked for defense building projects.

LIFE did not cover these investigations, which supports the assessment made at the beginning of this chapter: the magazine was critical of the construction industry to a degree but it laid primary blame for the slow progress made in American housing at the government’s doorstep. The fact that one of *LIFE*’s first articles featuring an in-depth representation of homeownership dealt with low-income housing and called for progress to be made so that homeownership became affordable to the masses should not be mistaken for being typical of *LIFE*’s representations at the time. All other articles between 1936 and 1941 introduced readers to homes constructed for above average income families. The most striking example of this is the piece on the Dunn family. While some of the homes introduced in “Houses for Modern Living” were quite possibly much more valuable than the Dunn home, the Dunns stand out because their home – in comparison to the often “dilapidated” rural housing of the time – must be seen as a particular exception to the “average” rural homeowner’s abode.

Chapter 2: “Not the Least Part of the Battle” - Homeownership throughout and after World War II (1942-1947)

This chapter discusses the portrayal of homeownership throughout the war years and the time immediately following the war. It illustrates the deep divide along race and class lines that challenged U.S. society during that time. Working class renters arrived by the thousands in war production centers and were perceived as nothing more than war profiteers by an irate, home-owning middle class in these areas. This predominantly white middle class took to the streets since the migratory movements into defense centers included many African Americans in search of better opportunities than they had been afforded before. Housing projects in particular caused race conflicts. An additional challenge was posed by returning veterans who were eager to join the ranks of homeowners and found themselves faced with a housing shortage in former defense centers. Within this chapter the following questions are addressed: How did the war feature into *LIFE*'s homeownership representations? In which ways did its homeownership representations account for gender constructions that had been altered by the war? How did the discourse change once the war came to an end?

LIFE's circulation numbers reached new heights thanks to its extensive war coverage: while circulation had been 2.86 million in 1940, by 1948 it would reach 5.45 million (Baughman 44). Patriotism and the search for “the American character” were “dominant concerns” within the pages of *LIFE* throughout the war years (Morgan 143). As the World War drew to a close and the Cold War dawned, its editors strove to “reestablish the Christian identity of the nation as its moral backbone and purpose in the world” (Morgan 153).

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States fully entered World War II, and the war began to have tangible effects on large parts of American society. This was largely caused by changes in American industries: On January 1, 1942, one article explained how “[the] past year saw the nation’s factories, mines, farms being converted, at first gradually, then with frantic speed, from a phenomenally productive peacetime organization into an integrated machine for war” (Jagger). Individual consumption of goods and services would have to be scaled back as industries refocused their output products and altered their output numbers. On January 2, 1942, sales of new passenger trucks and cars were banned throughout the country to mobilize “the entire American automobile industry for war production only” (“No Autos for Common Folks”). One article predicted what follows in January 1942:

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The American people face revolutionary changes in their way of life in 1942 and in the immediate years ahead. Only the very wealthy and the very poor will be untouched [...] People will wear patched clothes and shoes and like it. They may even be forced to press and mend their apparel at home. They will eat more stews, cheaper cuts of meat, more potatoes and bread, fewer vegetables [...] Families may need to double up because of a housing shortage. (“News behind the News”)

While the above quote suggested that it was essentially class lines that would determine whether or not a household was to feel the effects of the war (with the middle class being the primary group affected), another factor also played an important role: geography. Throughout the early 1940s, defense centers emerged in various locations and changed their respective communities drastically. Oftentimes, these new defense centers sprung up in areas which had not been manufacturing centers previously. A primary reason for this was security concerns: by positioning war production plants in the country’s interior, “i.e., at least 200 miles from the nation’s borders and away from local manufacturing centers”, they were less vulnerable to enemy attacks (Hooks and Bloomquist 309). As a result, thousands moved into these new construction centers which led indeed to severe local housing shortages, as predicted above, and caused conflicts between established inhabitants and their new neighbors. The numbers involved here were significant: in 1942, 2,000,000 people migrated into defense localities (Borders: 7). In December 1942, each day about 100 new defense workers arrived in San Francisco (“War Guest Drive in On in S.F. Bay Area”). Overall, it was estimated that 25 million people moved during the war: over twelve million people moved in between states, another thirteen million moved within states between 1942 and 1945 (Wynn 477).

The OWI Poster Campaign and LIFE

On June 13, 1942, the Roosevelt Administration founded the Office of War Information (OWI), a federal agency. Its primary goal was to make work in defense factories attractive to Americans, and to instill a strong sense of patriotism among citizens. It circulated pamphlets, posters, newsreels, and took part in Hollywood productions (Koppes & Black). It launched specific poster campaigns calling on the American public to cut back on spending and consumption to support the war effort: “Their message was unambiguous: Consumers must economize on goods and services, recycle waste and scrap, plant Victory Gardens and can the vegetables, comply with price controls and rationing laws, and put discretionary income into war bonds” (Witkowski 69). These posters were directed at Americans at home,

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instructing them how to help wage this war at the “home front”. The majority of these posters employed “positive imagery that involved citizens and personalized their war efforts” (Witkowski 72).

One such poster summarizing all of the important steps that Americans at home were urged to take to support the war effort calls on the viewer to “Make Yours a Victory Home” (Figure 2.1).

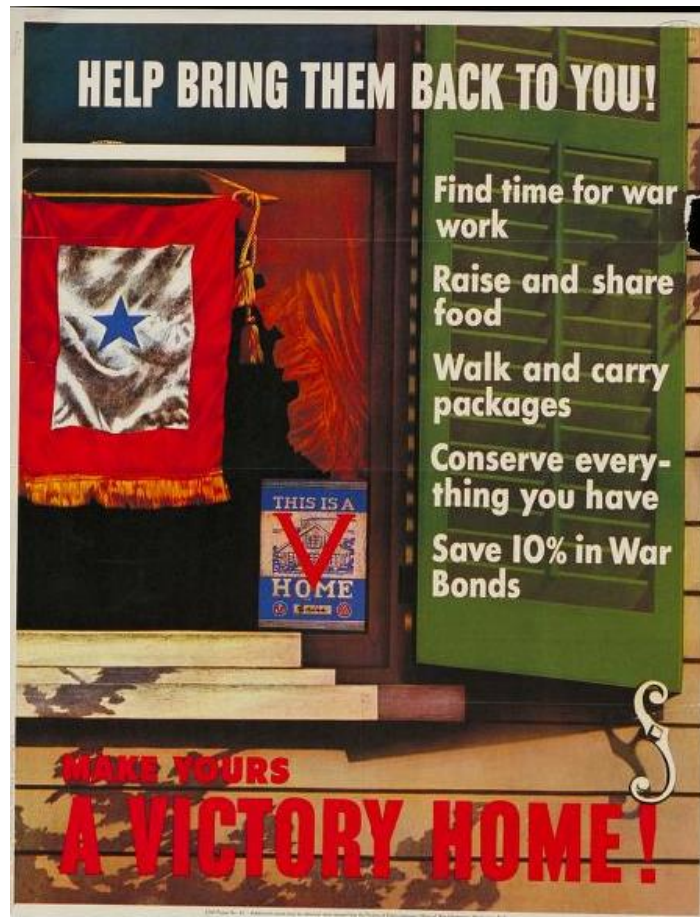


Figure 2.1: This 1943 OWI poster provides a list of typically recommended ways to support the war effort at the home front.

As indicated by this image, people were supposed to “find time for war work”, meaning that even if one’s primary job was not in a war production plant, one was still to invest some of one’s free time into the war effort (as a civilian defense worker, for example). Secondly, you should raise and share food – generally in a so-called Victory Garden. In January, 1942, the government announced the start of a nationwide Victory Garden Program – “to be started in each community under the auspices of Local Defense Councils” (“Victory Gardens to Bloom in U.S.”). In most cases, these were community gardens divided into plots, each of which was to be worked by individual families. The produce was to sustain each respective family, thus

bringing down food expenses and in turn allowing for more disposable income, ideally to be put into war bonds. Some rules had to be adhered to with regard to the Victory Gardens: “The quantity of tools, seeds and fertilizer in the United States is limited and should be used carefully and efficiently to avoid waste [...] Well-planned community gardens conserve these materials” (“Victory Gardens to Bloom in U.S.”). Later research on the topic has suggested that Victory Gardens’ contribution to the war effort was “more important psychologically than substantively, in that they gave Americans a sense of participation” (Witkowski 75-6).

Thirdly, the poster called on Americans to “walk and carry packages” as opposed to driving, so as to save gasoline, which was heavily rationed, to preserve one’s tires’ rubber, and to abstain from unnecessarily clogging the streets on which war goods and troops were transported. In a fourth step, Americans were called upon to “preserve everything you have”. This included food, but also clothing - rather than buying new apparel, people were expected to darn and mend their old pieces first - gas and energy, and, as will be shown below, one’s home. Finally, the poster called upon purchasing war bonds with as much as 10% of one’s income, thus supporting the war effort financially.

Throughout the war years, the OWI depicted homeowners as adhering particularly diligently to these steps and thus supporting the war effort. In November 1942, President Roosevelt exclaimed that it was thanks to the American homeowners that the United States could not be beaten in this war: “a nation of homeowners, of people who own a real share in their own land, is unconquerable (“Home-Owners Can’t Be Taken”).²⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, *LIFE* had been highly critical of the Roosevelt administration’s New Deal public housing ventures. But its homeownership representations in the war years were almost completely congruent with the messages sent by OWI posters: according to *LIFE*, simple steps could supposedly help win the war. On March 30 1942, just two months after the government kicked off its Victory Garden campaign, *LIFE* ran an article on Victory Gardens to be planted at home (“Gardens for U.S. at War”). Technically, such Gardens could be planted in public green spaces as well, but the article focused clearly on the suburban homeowner with his own spacious backyard. This is illustrated, for example, by the image featured on the opening page to the article (Figure 2.2). The drawing closely resembles the pictures from preceding years which had been supposed to animate readers to build their

²⁶ This sentiment can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson and his peers who identified the yeoman farmer (which can be viewed as the 18th century equivalent of the homeowner in the 20th century) as the perfect basis for a stable society “because this property ownership would assure that the majority had a stake in the society” (De Neufville & Barton: 186).

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own homes (chapter 1). Both home and backyard are rather spacious, suggesting a well-off family. The image features the family car in the top right corner, two children playing in a sand box, as well as the family dog, amounting to a peaceful idyll amidst times of global unrest. The only difference is the vegetable garden which takes up half of the backyard and dominates it completely. Not just the image suggested that the suburban homeowner was particularly able to help with this kind of war effort. The text accompanying the illustration supports this assumption: “If you live in a big city far from farms or open garden patches, the chances are that your backyard is too shady or too sooty to support vegetables and you had better grow a few flowers instead” (“Gardens for U.S. at War” 84). The sentence suggests not only that urban air and life quality are clearly lower than they are in the suburbs and the countryside, but also that urban residents cannot even support the war effort.

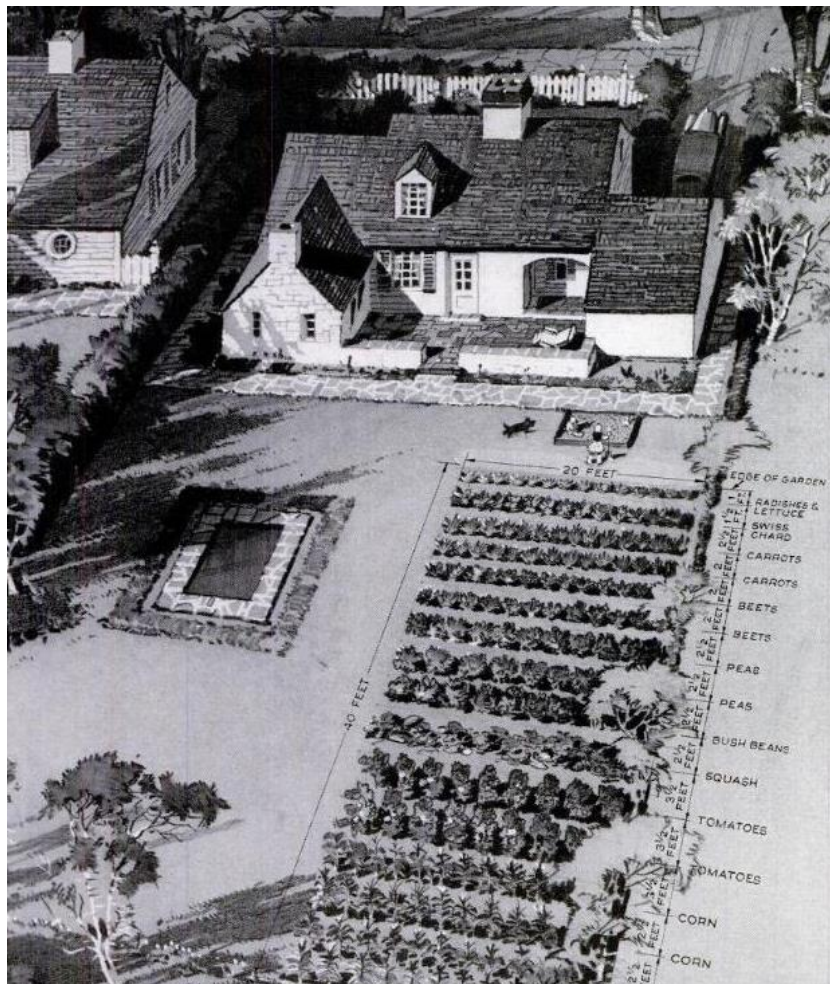


Figure 2.2 – LIFE provided its readers with an illustration to demonstrate an effective and work saving layout of a suburban Victory Garden. By including the dog and playing children, it is implied to readers that supporting the war effort need not cut back on one’s suburban “idyll”.

The idyll is supported by the explanation that planting and caring for a Victory Garden are hardly big time commitments: “Once dug up (a day’s hard work for a hired man) it can be

tended by an average of seven or eight hours’ work a week” (“Gardens for U.S. at War” 81). While it is thus suggested that the truly hard work can be done by a hired man, which reduces the homeowner’s sacrifice and work effort even further, the author promises the homeowner sure fulfillment and happiness from his Victory Garden:

[The] simple joys of growing things – the primitive pleasure of feeling damp earth in the fingers in April, the wonder of watching corn sprout and tomatoes swell and ripen overnight, the fierce delight of annihilating enemy weeds and bugs, [...] These are things that bring satisfied peace to wartime worriers and transform mute men into poets. (“Gardens for U.S. at War” 81)

The reference to gardening as a “primitive pleasure” picks up on the depiction of homeownership as a “primal urge” (chapter 1), which seems to imply that gardening and homeownership go hand in hand if one lives according to man’s true nature. Some key words within the first few lines suggest positive emotions: pleasure, wonder, and delight, which can be understood as assuring readers that fighting on the home front need not be gruesome. Yet, beginning with the “fierce” delight, the author unmistakably includes war vocabulary as he talks of “annihilating enemy weeds and bugs”. By drawing such parallels to the fighting done by the men overseas, the Victory Gardener is given to understand that he truly fights his own battles alongside them. This is further underscored by the term “wartime worriers”, which sounds similar to “wartime warriors”.

The implication that by growing one’s Victory Garden one did one’s bit to win the war without enduring hardship can also be found in the OWI’s poster campaign. One such poster (Figure 2.3) depicts a mother and her daughter canning foodstuffs, with plenty of food cans in the background, suggesting an abundance of food despite the fact that food rationing is set in place. Furthermore, mother and daughter both display happy facial expressions and wear bright, matching outfits, which advertise the growing and canning of food as a bonding experience for mothers and daughters – marking the homeowner’s war effort, just as implied by *LIFE*, as a return to old family values, rather than sacrifices and hardships.



Figure 2.3: This 1943 OWI poster suggests that in canning one's own food one can enjoy an abundance of foodstuffs despite the rationing of food.

In addition to the article on Victory Gardens, *LIFE* ran other features depicting homeowners' ways to support the war effort. One example for this is Mrs. Willard Carlton Smith, introduced to readers in December, 1942, mother of three sons, two of whom have recently joined the army: "She is one of many mothers who have rearranged family dinner tables to close a gap or two, who had adjusted their budgets to a few dollars less and their working days to a few hours more" ("Mother" 59). Mrs. Smith and her husband are homeowners, and even though she has to make do with less money than usual (partly because 10% of her husband's income goes to buying war bonds, just as called for by the OWI), they have just managed to pay off their home, and it is prominently included in the picture spread accompanying the article (Figure 2.4). The article carefully details the manifold ways in which Mrs. Smith is indispensable both to her family as well as her country: she saves money by darning old clothes, preserving fruits and vegetables, and crunching the numbers despite

that fact that she has a “feminine antipathy for figures” (“Mother” 61). In addition, from time to time she works as a substitute teacher in one of the town’s schools to make some money on the side. And – as remarked laudably within the article - she still finds time to run her six-room house, to assist at polls on election days, to do church work, and to remain on call as a civilian defense worker. She has accompanied her younger son to the recruiting station to sign the necessary parents’ release papers: “The boys want to get in the fight, that’s natural. I want to keep them home, that’s natural too. But I won’t try to hold them back” (“Mother” 62). This quote by Mrs. Smith suggests that not only does the act of gardening fulfill a “primal urge”; the men fighting also do what is “natural” and follow their urge. The women not only sacrifice some comforts and luxuries; their sacrifice also extends to their children who they cannot keep at home. Mrs. Smith’s name²⁷, as well as the names of millions of other mothers, as the article points out, will never appear on any honor roll, yet what she does for her family and her country “is not the least part of the battle” (“Mother” 59).

However, while *LIFE* thus ascribed to women a considerable role in fighting the war, one cannot help but notice the diminutive terms applied in the piece. By talking of “a few hours more” to be spent working, the article insinuates that, while women have to put on more effort than previously, the difference is not all that considerable. In addition, the reference to Mrs. Smith’s “female antipathy” to numbers makes it very clear that, while women are joining the workforce at this point in time, traditional concepts of women and their capabilities are hardly being challenged. This is also underscored by the quote highlighted above, in which Mrs. Smith talks about men’s “natural” urge to get into the fight, and women’s natural urge to keep them at home and provide shelter for them. This illustrates a very important point about women war workers from this time: The women who took industrial jobs during the war effort were no middle-class housewives. Rather, “a significant proportion of women who were working in manufacturing during the war had already been working before the war although in different occupations. These women jumped at the chance to acquire high paying industrial jobs” (Kossoudji & Dresser 433).²⁸ This argument is

²⁷ Surely, the choice to make this story about somebody with as common a family name as this was at least partially driven by the desire to enable more people to identify with her.

²⁸ But while many employers were quoted throughout the media as being perfectly happy with the quality of work done by their female work force, they bemoaned the fact that (married) women often did not stay very long. One personnel officer quoted by Connolly, suggested, “Perhaps the house is dirty and the children are running wild” (80), clearly indicating that the combination of (increased) household duties and entering the work force proved particularly hard on married women with children to care for. It also indicated where a woman’s priorities were supposed to lay, regardless of class: with her home and her children.

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underscored by the fact that middle-class Mrs. Smith does not contribute to her household’s income with an industrial job, but rather as a substitute teacher, who would certainly be paid less than a worker in a plant.



Figure 2.4 – The article on Mrs. Smith takes care to point out that the Smiths have managed to pay off their mortgage in full, thus qualifying them as “complete” homeowners.

Another example to illustrate representations of gender roles among homeowners within *LIFE* is the 1943 editorial “How to Fix It”. In a series of pictures readers are taught how to hammer a nail into a wall, how to fix a broken window pane or how to upholster furniture. In most of the pictures we see hands performing the task in question, and more than half of the images feature a woman’s (carefully manicured) hand, suggesting that chores that had previously been considered typical “men’s tasks”, such as fixing a leaky faucet, were now extended to women as well (Figure 2.5).²⁹

²⁹ *LIFE* was not alone in attempting to interest women in this kind of work. Colleges all over the nation offered home repairs courses for women. One example can be found in the *Barnard Bulletin* which offered to the purely female college population courses in “Emergency Skills”, one of which was Home Repairs (“Register for Skills”). Interestingly enough, while the other emergency courses teaching home nursing or nutrition filled up, the home repairs course had to be dropped due to an insufficient number of registrations (“66 Sign for NS Courses”).

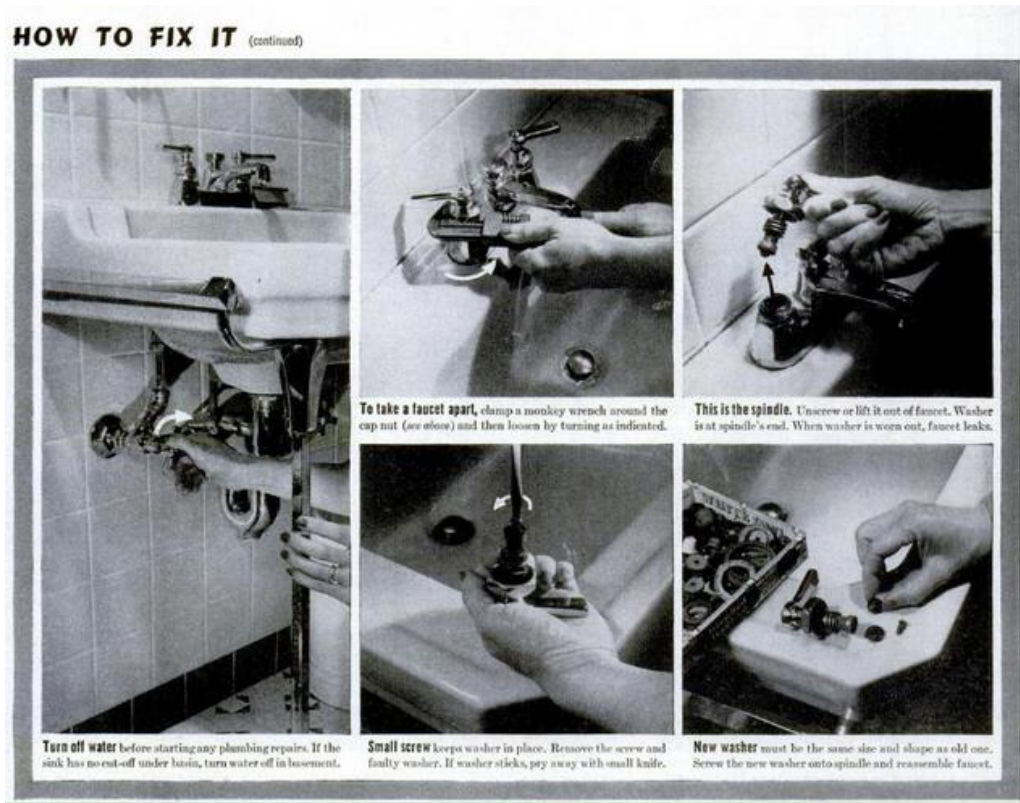


Figure 2.5: Editorials aimed particularly at educating women how to do simple tasks around the house without having to call in professional help.

So while the middle class housewife did not take up men's jobs outside of the home, it was acknowledged that they took up men's jobs around the house, marking a clear distinction between the “work sphere” and the “home sphere” with regard to middle class gender roles. This underscores the conclusion that World War II did not, in fact, significantly alter a woman's position within society in the long term. According to scholars such as Gail Braybon, Juliet Mitchell and Denise Riley, during and after the war “powerful groups such as trade unions, government ministries, and doctors tried successfully to limit the alterations in gender relations created by the demand for women's labour, and hence [...] underlying structures remained the same” (Summerfield 4). Looking back on the war years in August 1945, an article in *The Antioch Review* claimed that, even at the height of women's employment, “the layman never sensed the desperate need for women's labor” (Bixler 360). As a matter of fact, according to the article:

It is not a part of the emotional knowledge of the nation that women were half the country's labor force, that ships and planes and munitions in a war of survival would not have been where they were needed if women, many of them wives and mothers, had not shared in the manufacture of those ships and planes and munitions. (Bixler 361)

Yet, while women from lower income classes were involved in the manufacture of ships, planes and munitions, middle class (white) women were called upon to continue working in their own(ed) homes. The *New York Times* referred to the housewife as an “economy soldier”, and exclaimed: “No more important ‘soldier’ exists in the country’s victory program than the housewife” as she controls the purchase and use of home materials (“Housewife as Economy ‘Soldier’ Urged to Avoid Waste in Buying”). Politicians agreed with this line of argument; In February 1942, New York State Governor Lehman voiced at a conference:

Every housewife must understand that unnecessary sickness of a husband or child retards the war effort because it means loss of time and loss of production. The kitchen becomes a battlefield. Good food, orderly ways and habits of life and alertness to combat minor illnesses are tasks which are primarily part of the war (“Lehman Puts War up to Individuals”).

The reference to “orderly ways and habits of life” suggests this war was not seen as an opportunity to radically alter established gender roles or societal structures, but rather to focus on keeping them in place to the greatest extent possible. This is also reflected in a *LIFE* article from October 4, 1943. The subheading to the title “LIFE Goes to a Backyard Party in Chicago” reads “Wartime brings revival of neighborly customs as American families find their fun in simple pastimes close to home” (127). The home featured in the story belongs to Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gear, currently deployed overseas, and his wife. Mrs. Gear finds herself alone in the house along with three children aged four to ten years old who had to be kept “amused and happy through a long summer in the city” (“LIFE Goes to a Backyard Party in Chicago” 127), so as to retain normalcy as much as possible. Therefore, Mrs. Gear does not complain when her boys bring along some playmates to use the backyard for commando practice. As the yard happens to also feature a playhouse, little girls are drawn to it to play homemakers and to participate in rope skipping in the smooth driveway. Eventually, the children’s parents join them, and neighbors fill the Gears’ backyard for most of the summer. This article both celebrates a neighborly idyll, and reinforces traditional gender roles: the boys are depicted as pretending to shoot rifles at an imaginary enemy on the playhouse’s roof while the girls clean the playhouse. The article does not mention whether Mrs. Gear works outside of the home. While her husband is off to fight the war, she appears to be mainly occupied with keeping her children happy. While this demonstrates an unchanged understanding of gender roles, one distinct change to pre-war times is emphasized in this article: as hinted at by

the subheading, families finally spend more of their leisure time at home, and *LIFE* celebrates this as a laudable change:

The backyard, a much neglected resource of the American home in the nation’s restless, peripatetic days before the war, has come into favor again. In many places during the last summer it was planted solidly to victory gardens. In others it became a playground for patriotic families who obeyed the Government, did not travel, spent their vacations at home. (127)³⁰

It is particularly striking to see *LIFE* describe the days *before* the war as “restless” and “peripatetic”, while *during* the war the nation is witnessing the migration of millions of people into war production centers, the difference being that before the war, much of the movement had been for leisure’s sake. Indeed, the years before the war had seen a considerable rise in cross-country tourism among the middle class. As more households owned cars they had been increasingly mobile and had chosen to spend their free time away from home – something *LIFE* had neglected to mention until now.³¹ As shown by the OWI poster calling on people to make one’s home a Victory Home (Figure 2.1), people were supposed to walk and carry their packages. Other posters called on Americans to refrain from traveling longer distances altogether for the same reasons enumerated above: save gas, rubber and other materials, and keep the roads clear. In pointing out that “patriotic families” spent their vacations at home and in their own backyard, *LIFE* once more went along with main messages by the OWI. The call for people to spend their vacation time at home instead of traveling around the country was also reflected in advertisements placed within *LIFE* at the time, such as the following advertisement for Kinsey Whiskey (Figure 2.6). Printed in the *LIFE* issue from August 13, 1945, released just days before the War in the Pacific arena came to an end, the ad’s text read “This bird’s-eye view of our wartime vacation ought to inspire

³⁰ Other sources of the time lauded this development as well. For example, the *Journal of Home Economics* featured an article entitled “Democracy Turns to the Family”. In it, the author claimed that in previous years, family life had been eroded by factors such as the possibility for each family member to retire into his or her own separate space or “the avid hunger which various groups have shown to relieve the family of many of its functions” (Plant 2). This was particularly problematic, according to the author, as only the family unit could do an adequate job of preparing a child for democracy, because “schools generally fail here” (Plant 4). “Thankfully” - according to the article - this was now coming to an end, as families were forced to spend more time at home with outside activities being curtailed severely.

³¹ “The flexibility of the automobile and the concomitant expansion in the network of roads increased the set of tourist sites” (Weiss 313). Auto-camping became particularly popular – so popular, in fact that by 1930, motel chains began to develop – regardless, even, of the Depression: “Early in 1931 the National Autohaven Company of Chicago announced plans to establish 1,000 Wayside Inns [...] In October of 1931, it was announced that National Motor Inns would establish a chain of ‘glorified auto-camps,’ but the description of the property reads much more like what came to be known as the motel” (Weiss 316).

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you to spend *your* holiday at home, too”. In displaying the two men featured in a relaxed and unhurried atmosphere, the ad picks up on *LIFE*’s recommendation that wartime vacations are best spent at home. There is irony in the use of the phrase “wartime vacation” and the suggestion that both men are doing their part to help the war effort while relaxing with a glass of whiskey.



Figure 2.6: Advertisements printed in *LIFE* went along in calling on Americans to spend their leisure time at home so as not to waste resources needed for the war.

Home Repairs to Boost Morale

While in preceding years, homeowners had been called upon to have their homes modernized to the hilt to adapt to modern life’s comforts, people were now asked to focus on

keeping their homes in good condition, as well as insulate their homes to preserve oil and gas for the war effort. To paint one’s home would not make it more energy-efficient, but it did something else: it kept up morale. According to one advertisement from 1942, “A neglected house shows lack of faith in the future of America – an efficient, gay home is a badge of American courage!” and to keep one’s home in good shape was the chance “to keep up morale on the home front!” (Figure 2.7). This is underscored by the image used for this ad: a figure labeled “Home Repairs” is beating the drums and marching in line with an enthusiastic couple – homeowners? – who join in the battle hymn. The depiction of “Home Repairs” as playing music in times of war clearly underscores the message that home repairs serve as a morale booster: “Music sustains the soldier when the going is rough [...] music carries him over the top and on to victory” (Bronson 27).

The Spirit Of '42

Keep Your Home in Repair

It's up to every homeowner to keep up morale on the home front! To make your house as cheerful and inviting as possible! A neglected house shows lack of faith in the future of America—an efficient, gay home is a badge of American courage! And money spent on your home is a permanent investment that pays you dividends in security and comfort. O. C. CLUSS has a full line of building materials for your home repairs. Call 1045 today for your roofing, siding, paint and mill-work needs!

POPULAR MONTHLY PAYMENT PLAN AVAILABLE

O. C. Cluss Lumber Co.
“Twenty-Fifth Year”
HALF SQUARE OFF FAYETTE STREET
FOOT OF PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE
PLENTY OF FREE PARKING

Uniontown, Pa. Phone 1045

Figure 2.7: To avoid being perceived as being “insensitive”, companies clothed their advertisements in calls to buy their products so as to support the war effort. This ad for a lumber company illustrates this very well.

The idea that the improvement of one’s own home was a considerable contribution to the war effort took off, possibly because it constituted a patriotic way to consume in these

times when people were generally asked to be as frugal as possible. Between 1942 and 1945, a host of advertisements for loan and lumber companies called on Americans to improve their homes to help American soldiers win the war abroad.³² Homeowners were constantly reminded in these advertisements that if they let their home become run down, they displayed a lack of faith in the future of the United States. The Federal Housing Administration also appealed to the American populace to take their duties as homeowners seriously: “Proper care and repair of the home is more important now than ever before, FHA officials emphasize” (“FHA Advises Making Minor Home Repairs Immediately”). Just as *LIFE* had picked up on the call to plant Victory Gardens, so it did with the general sentiment that American homes had to be kept in shape to fight a successful war on the home front. Published in 1943, the article “Life Goes House-Painting” tells the story of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Wallis Steck, who live in a house they built the previous year in Newtown, Connecticut. As the house is badly in need of a new paint job and the Stecks are “faced with the scarcity and costliness of house painters” (127), they turn to their neighbors for help in the matter. Mr. Steck mixes the paint for the helpful guests, while his wife utilizes their ration points to set up hot dogs and cider in the yard. According to the article, a happy gathering ensues, with people showing up throughout the afternoon, with each moving in one direction or the other to paint a random part of the house (Figure 2.8). One of the neighbors provides an impromptu magic show on the lawn, which not only the children enjoy. In the pictures accompanying the article, the reader can observe the people painting, chattering and laughing, clearly taking pride in what they are doing. This is also underscored by Figure 2.9, in which the Stecks’ neighbors pose proudly in front of their finished project. Overall, the article once more suggests to readers that actions to support the war effort need not be strenuous. They can be enjoyable instead.

Similarly to the article on Victory Gardens, the article on the Stecks’ housepainting features a strange dichotomy in which the hard work is either done by a hired hand (in case of the Victory Garden) or work is done in a manner that is more reminiscent of a garden party than a hard day’s work. This accords with historians’ assessments of later decades that the sacrifices made at the home front were hardly as big as OWI campaigns (or the *LIFE* article on Mrs. Smith) would suggest:

³² The utilization of the home front war effort by advertising agencies was considerable after Pearl Harbor. In 1942, the advertising industry had formed the so-called *War Advertising Council*, a private organization which collaborated with the OWI and other federal agencies in running public information campaigns. By 1945, this Council had run over a hundred campaigns calling on Americans to partake in blood drives, to purchase war bonds, and to improve their homes. Value and personnel for these campaigns was estimated to be over a billion dollars (Leff: 1310).

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The mystique of unconditional sacrifice, forged in the war itself and celebrated in collective memory, has not fared well as an interpretive guide to wartime politics and mobilization. Even at the time staffers of American mobilization agencies commonly despaired of the difficulties of transforming ‘willingness into action’ and cracking ‘the shell of public apathy,’ given ‘desultory, half-hearted’ citizen involvement and ‘reluctance to forego the ordinary pleasures and comforts of life as usual’. (Leff 1297)

LIFE and the OWI seem to address this reluctance to forgo ordinary pleasures and comforts by portraying efforts such as the Victory Gardens as the better of two worlds: requiring little work but providing a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Figure 2.8 in particular once more suggests that everyday life is hardly affected by the war. Rather, the war’s side effects are depicted as providing the middle class Stecks and their supposedly middle class neighbors an entertaining way to spend a Saturday together, while presenting them as supporting the war effort.



Figure 2.8 – In its article on the Stecks, *LIFE* suggested to readers that necessary chores could be turned into fun activities. To support that point, the editors included images that may as well have been taken from a family photo album.



Figure 2.9 – The way in which the Stecks and their neighbors are presented – smiling proudly before their finished project – underscores the article’s message that chores to support the war effort at home could indeed be “fun”.

Communal Strife

LIFE’s article on the Stecks and their neighbors provided an idyllic portrayal of community life within the United States. This is noteworthy insofar as social tensions rose considerably within American communities at the time. This became particularly clear throughout the war years in defense centers: freshly migrated war workers were often viewed with contempt by established residents as they were perceived as “profiteering” from the war rather than sacrificing their standard of living (Leff 1301).³³ In turn, as defense centers were often beset by housing shortages, some homeowners there rented out rooms within their homes for ever higher prices. Those homeowners who were affected by the war much more severely than those portrayed in *LIFE* found their way into newspapers and other magazines of the time, but not onto the pages of *LIFE*, as the magazine’s editors were keen on boosting a sense of nationalism and reaffirming American communal values among white, middle class Americans.

Unlike *LIFE*, *Collier’s* addressed—albeit in fiction—the hardships and sacrifices faced by a family dealing with the challenges of the war at home. In a short story published

³³ According to Leff: “War sharpens and reframes domestic internal conflict by disrupting customary standards of comparison. Peacetime inequalities are often taken for granted as ‘neutral’ results of an impersonal market. But in wartime these same inequalities could rank – and rankle – as inequities” (1301).

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in August 1942, entitled “Home is Where it’s Peaceful – Mr. Waltham and the war; The problem of a man who suddenly lost his family” (Temple), *Collier’s* presented the tale of Mr. Waltham, a homeowner in a war production center, living with his wife and daughter at home, with one son serving overseas in the military and another son away at college. The story depicts the changes to Waltham’s formerly-quiet neighborhood resulting from the influx of war production workers, his difficulty in adjusting to the need to house war workers in his home, and his reaction to the unexpected news that his daughter is about to wed a soon-to be deployed soldier. Waltham learns from his new son-in-law that the newlyweds plan to defer their honeymoon until after the war, saving their money for the purchase of a home. Hearing this, Waltham becomes reconciled to the marriage, resolving to “take care of things at home” while his new son-in-law serves abroad.

This story promoted the concept that those remaining at home must do their part to support the war effort but portrayed, more clearly than did *LIFE’s* articles or OWI posters, the real hardships that those at home endured.

Housing shortages in defense areas were severe. In October 1942, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy piece on the situation in Newport, Connecticut. It featured Harry and Leah Bradshaw who had come to Newport for a job, and bought themselves a trailer for shelter. The article’s author Milton Bracker acknowledges some coziness to the setting, but he quickly points out how cramped the quarters are: “it was hard to tell where the kitchen ended and the boudoir began”. A year later, in October 1943, a *Collier’s* article took a close look at another defense center: Mobile, Alabama: “A city of 75,000 has suddenly become a city of more than 200,000. It is a city gasping for air. With men sleeping in trailers and tar-paper shacks and boarded-up trucks on every vacant lot licensed as a ‘trailer court’” (Connolly: 78). To address the situation, governmental housing projects were continued throughout the war – most of them for rent. In Newport, three such projects (Park-Holm, Tonomy Hill, Anchorage) provided 1,400 dwelling units for newly arrived war workers and their families. Many contemporaries perceived such measures to be an extension of previously introduced New Deal measures. Such fears were expressed, for example, by Carl F. Distelhorst, assistant to the president of the Federal Home Bank of Pittsburgh who complained that “the United States already was feeling the effects of activity of the ‘social’ homebuilder since they had won thousands of votes, votes which later would favor complete government ownership of industry and business” (“Says Housing is Local Issue”). Members of Congress who agreed with Distelhorst’s assessment curtailed public housing legislation so that governmental

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construction could hardly catch up with the need for shelter – and considering these living conditions of defense workers, the comfortable war efforts of suburban homeowners appear even more ironic:

Congress was asked last May [1943] to appropriate \$400,000,000 for construction of 200,000 additional units. These would have housed about one fifth of the 1,100,000 new migrant workers expected this current fiscal year. The appropriation was delayed six weeks in committee, then cut three fourths, only \$100,000,000 being allocated. So thousands of our defense workers face the coming winter in tents, tar-paper shacks, old leaky trailers, sheds, chicken houses, unheated barns, damp basements and crowded, filthy, vermin-ridden lodging houses. (Connolly 23)

Fear of being perceived as extending “socialistic” housing programs may not have been the only reason behind Congress’ reluctance to appropriate the full amount to the construction program. An additional aspect may well have been the considerable tensions between migrant war workers and established residents of communities, which could have made legislation, passed to aid these people unpopular among white, middle class voters. These residents, men like Mr. Waltham, had worked hard, taken a decade to pay off their loans, and now felt to be at a clear disadvantage compared to the new men coming into town: these war workers – renters! – suddenly made more money an hour than the homeowners made in their jobs, yet they received rent controlled and modern government housing. What made it worse in the eyes of some was the fact that these workers in many instances were not even white. Instead, many African Americans streamed into defense centers in the hopes of better chances of social improvement (Wynn 472). The antipathy with which established residents viewed the war workers becomes clear throughout sources from the time. One example is a *New York Times* piece entitled “War Workers Damage Rural Mailboxes As ‘Relaxation’ on Nightly Auto Trips”, a scathing article on two war workers who had nothing better to do with their free time than making the homeowners’ lives harder. By portraying it in this way, the article illustrates how the lines of conflict in these defense centers often run exactly between homeowners and renters. Another very telling example is an article on the death of two children who burned to death while the parents (war workers) were out working. The article finished with the words, “It’s a fine business, leaving little children alone and unprotected while parents work in defense plants [...] I believe in many cases it’s nothing more than money-mania” (“Two Children Burned to Death; Both War Worker Parents Absent”). The

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accusation was wide-spread that war workers’ motives were driven by a desire for self-enrichment instead of patriotism. In general, people were very keen on discerning whether any other group (be it based on class, race, or gender lines) received more benefits from this war than they did: “no feature of World War II or more recent mobilization experience has been more striking than the scrutiny which each of the several economic groups brings to bear upon what the others are getting” (Leff 1301). As a result, the white middle class in these war production centers may well have perceived itself as making sacrifices all around while their new neighbors were the only beneficiaries from the situation, leading to resentment and prejudices towards these newcomers.

One cartoon (Figure 2.10) conveys a multitude of prejudices war workers were faced with – for one, the mother worries about them keeping the room neat, suggesting that these people do not know how to clean up after themselves. Considering that “orderly ways and habits of life” were deemed essential for the white middle class’s home front battle, this is a weighty offense. In addition, the daughter advises that the rent be collected in advance, suggesting they might skip out on their rent payments otherwise. At the same time, the cartoon depicts the extreme demand created by the vast numbers of war workers in defense centers, as a whole crowd shows up to rent the room.



Figure 2.10: Demand for living space in war production centers by far exceeded supply, and this problem made it into daily papers’ cartoons.

The term “war guest” employed in this 1943 cartoon was established in government campaigns which called on homeowners in defense centers to open up their homes for the war workers. Such campaigns were also run by the National Housing Agency and various municipalities. One example of these campaigns is one run in New York State. Edward Weinfeld, New York State Commissioner of Housing, explained in July 1943: “Plans for a ‘war guest’ campaign are in preparation by the State Division of Housing and within a week we will be prepared to cooperate with you and the home registration offices in your city in bringing this need to the attention of every family” (Hagerty). The first installment of this housing campaign announced by Weinfeld was set into motion in Niagara Falls on July 20,

1943, with more cities to follow. The campaign’s slogan read “Rent a room for victory” (“Would Share Homes with War Workers”). This slogan tapped once more into the sentiment that this way one would be doing one’s part to win the war. To emphasize the patriotic nature of opening one’s home to war workers, the registration cards to be filled out by homeowners were colored in red, white and blue (“War Council Asks Room be Let to Defense Workers”). The representative of a war guest campaign in Panama City, Florida, argued along the same lines: “This is not an unimportant program, for indirectly the production of war essentials depends on the extent to which housing is made available to workers” (“Home Building is Well under Way in Various Areas”). According to this logic, if the homeowner opened his house to war workers, his action directly affected the output of weaponry used to fight and win this war.³⁴

In addition to such campaigns, new legislation was passed to foster the provision of rooms for the war workers. Some municipalities introduced special legislation to make renting out a room as easy as possible for small home owners. One example for this was legislation passed in the city of Chicago, where up to two “war guests” were allowed without subjecting the homeowner to regular rent regulations (“Ask Homeowners to Rent Rooms to War Workers”). Some Californian communities allowed the respective homeowners more freedom in evicting roomers if they required the rooms for themselves or did not get along with the roomers. This, too, was designed to eradicate any qualms homeowners might feel about taking strangers into their homes (“Rent Control Permits Eviction of Roomers”).

If all else failed, homeowners were reminded that, in times of emergency such as this, the government could indeed force them to share. As one Ohio paper explained to its readership: “Unless they voluntarily make available to war workers unoccupied rooms in their residences, home-owners face the prospect of seizure of their properties by the federal government” (“Come Through, or Else.”). Similar sentiments were voiced throughout the country. In Michigan, a regional director of the National Housing agency warned “that the housing shortage in Detroit and neighboring industrial areas soon may become so acute that billeting of war workers in private homes will be necessary” (“May Billet War Workers”).

³⁴ Those homeowners whose homes were too small to take in renters permanently were asked to share their holiday meals with soldiers who were training at nearby facilities and happened to be far away from their own homes. One article happily pointed out that “All over America in hundreds of small towns and large cities, homeowners are contributing their facilities to make this Easter as happy as possible for the men who are fighting and preparing to fight this war” by inviting these men to their home for the holiday (“A USO Appeal”).

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In December, 1942, the OWI called on people to abstain from moving into defense areas which were “bursting at their seams”: “importation of more workers would invite ‘disease, dangerous overcrowding of public vehicles and housing conditions bordering on indecency’” (“War Work Migration Discouraged by OWI”).

The housing shortage in war production areas affected African American war workers particularly hard - in the Detroit area alone, there were 11,000 black war workers “without adequate housing” (“Negro War Workers Sue House Agency on Rental Prejudice”). In Baltimore, African Americans comprised one fifth of the war time population, yet only one fiftieth of the city’s area was designated as living space for them: “Old chicken houses, coal sheds, and garages are typical residences for these Americans and their families” (“Unbelievably Bad Housing Conditions for Negro War Workers in Baltimore Vicinity”). In other production centers, African Americans now filled places previously occupied by other minorities. For example, after Japanese Americans were forcibly evacuated from San Francisco to be interned in camps for the duration of the war, African American war workers moved into the neighborhood once occupied by these evacuees. With few other housing options available to them, black war workers continued to stream into the area, and according to a 1943 report by the San Francisco Real Estate Board, “even the bathtub is rented for a bed at \$12 a month” (“Negroes Jam Japtown”).

In some instances, and quite certainly driven by economic interests, African Americans’ employers intervened on their behalf. One such example is the letter by a personnel director of a foundry in Cleveland, Ohio to the War Housing office: “We are faced with the problem of losing many of our employees due to the lack of housing [open to blacks] ... It is so very important to us that these men remain here to carry on our war production work and that we endeavor in every way to house them” (quoted in Michney 937).

Racial tensions increased markedly, with both white and African American homeowners protesting against plans for low-rent projects for either ethnicity in their neighborhoods (“Priorities Prevent Erection of White Low-Cost Projects”).³⁵ In September, 1943, *Collier’s* was not the only publication warning of “race riots coming”, referring to local white homeowners fighting “bitterly against government housing projects for Negroes in the

³⁵ Some sources of the time claimed that conflicts along racial lines were further exacerbated by the fact that African American war workers had formerly been employed in white middle-class households, and left this employment for the better wages and working conditions in war plants. One article in *Collier’s* suggested that this movement was to blame for an increase in racial tensions at the time: “A lot of the anti-Negro feeling rises from the great middle class of whites. The women hate doing their own dishes and housework and other tasks formerly done by Negroes” (Davenport: 82).

immediate vicinity of their properties” (Davenport: 81). One particularly prominent example for this is the controversy (and the rioting) surrounding the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in Detroit. This project was supposed to house African American war workers, but when the first residents wanted to move in in 1942, white residents from surrounding neighborhoods formed a picket line, burned crosses and became violent (Kersten 15). Two months later, a second attempt was made to move African Americans in – under the auspices of more than 1,500 state troops, city and state police. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) warned in public statements that photographs of riots surrounding the Sojourner Truth Project “are now being used by Axis agents” (“Probe of Detroit’s Jim Crow Housing Proposal is Asked”). As race riots broke out throughout the summer of 1943 in cities such as Los Angeles, Mobile, Newark, Philadelphia and others, the NAACP issued a statement calling for the Department of Justice to investigate the fomenters of these incidents “some of whom are known to be financed by Nazi money” (“Riot Blamed on Axis Propaganda”). The message intended here is clear: those in favor of and supporting these incidents of racial unrest, indirectly support the enemy during these times of war, which makes them traitors. Another, similar, line of argument reminded Americans that “Anyone who holds in contempt any group of citizenry is unconsciously serving our enemies by disuniting Americans” (“True Americans Must Curb Hatred’...”).

Despite such arguments, racial discrimination continued, and it also continued to occur in governmental housing projects. In New London, Connecticut, for example, 25 African American mechanics were barred from being housed along with white workers in a government housing development. As a result, these men “had to sleep in parked cars or walk the streets because there are no housing facilities for Negroes” (“Negro War Workers Barred from Govt. Housing Development”). Similarly, a governmental housing project in Detroit also did not allow African Americans in. The Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) was in charge of a 2,500 unit housing development in the city. In March 1944, of these units “there are at least 800 family units vacant and there are no white applicants for these units. Despite this fact, FPHA refuses to lease these vacant units to any of the Negro applicants solely because of their race or color” (“Negro War Workers Sue House Agency on Rental Prejudice”). Just how widespread racist actions by the FPHA and other governmental agencies were becomes apparent when reading one commentary entitled “Strange interlude”. This supposedly strange interlude is a statement made by Langdon Post, FPHA housing representative on the West Coast who has stated that “there shall be neither discrimination nor segregation of minority groups” in projects under his jurisdiction. The paper’s commentary

reads “Our hats are off to Mr. Post and we only wish there were more such officials in the Federal Public Housing Administration and in all the other countless federal bureaus” (“Strange Interlude”). The commentary moves on to condemn “all the hypocritical drivel about the post-war world of sweetness and light and the mock indignation over Nazi ‘racial’ persecutions”, while racial segregation continues to be practiced throughout the United States (“Strange Interlude”). This is an important statement which highlights the deep divide along racial lines in the United States. Just like the conflicts between homeowners and (war worker) renters, this conflict was discussed sporadically in some articles, but it did not make its way into the mainstream discourse of the time. Additional conflicts included strained relations between employers and unions, and the variety of frictions within American society at the time were summed up well by Wynn who states “the war strained labor harmony and pointed to the persistence of aspects of class conflict, it also exacerbated other social tensions” (470). The mass migrations altered the social landscape in the long term, because the majority of war workers did not return to their home towns, but either stayed or moved on to new opportunities once war plants began to close down after the war.

Searching “Security and Order in the Postwar World”

Once the war was over, “Americans were more than willing to settle for a return to a normality and stability based on ideals of the past. Fearful of the future, ordinary Americans sought security and order in the postwar world” (Wynn 478). It should be noted that these “ordinary” Americans eager to return to the way things had been before the war were most likely those Americans who had been doing well before the war, those who had been secure in their middle class status before the opportunity of war production plant work came along. The eagerness for the war to be over permeated *LIFE* well before “V-Day” in Europe and Japan on May 8 and August 15, 1945 respectively. In January, 1945, *LIFE* announced: “The trials and separations of war have made real to millions of Americans the beauty and contentment of home [...] It is none too early to think about the postwar house” (“LIFE Presents...”63). This quote is taken from an article which was the first of a series dedicated to “examine the homes in which Americans live and the ways in which these homes can be improved” (“LIFE Presents...” 63). This article set the tone for years to come by celebrating, once more, the homeowner as consumer. If there was any lingering doubt whether homeowners would have to continue making the sacrifices they had supposedly been making after Pearl Harbor, *LIFE* put it to rest with this article which focused on one particular home improvement: storage walls enabling consumption on a new level. Readers were assured that “[if] a family ultimately had all the interior walls of its house built as storage walls it could buy all the

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clothes and gadgets and knickknacks it wanted without running out of space in which to keep all of them” (“LIFE Presents...” 66). This claim was underscored by the large-scale illustrations accompanying the article (Figures 2.11 and 2.12). Here, we see how much *LIFE* anticipated the average homeowner to collect once this time of (perceived) deprivation would have come to an end. It is also interesting to note the apparent excitement of the article’s author that everything the homeowner owned no longer had to be stored away in the attic and in other places far out of sight, suggesting that all of one’s possessions (in addition to one’s house) could now be shown off to one’s guests more easily.

One striking aspect about the images shown below is the nature of things depicted here. There are no pots and pans, no tableware or any kinds of linen. These are all things to spend one’s leisure time with: board games and books, tennis rackets and fishing gear. In Figure 2.12, the left, beige-colored part of the storage wall features a home entertainment system with radio and record player. Clearly, the well-off post-war homeowner was expected to enjoy his leisure time as much as possible. Additionally, Figure 2.11 features an American flag placed behind the woman in the picture, implying the homeowner’s sense of patriotism and good citizenship. The focus on leisure equipment is an indicator that this article once more targets well-to-do middle class readers who must have not only disposable income but also time on their hands.



Figure 2.11: By placing an American flag behind the woman in this image, the consumerism displayed here is given the appearance of a patriotic act



Figure 2.12: The focus on leisure equipment in this image is an indicator that the article targets well-to-do middle class readers who have both disposable income and time at their hands.

In October, 1945, *LIFE* published an article entitled “The California Way of Life” which its author hailed as “the most glowing example of the modern good life” which may contain “an answer to many basic problems of modern living” (“The California Way of Life” 105). The two aspects that *LIFE* identified as key to this “California Way of Life” were homeownership and suburbs: “Their [Californians] enormous automotive mobility and the decentralization of their shops and playgrounds have tended to make conventional city life almost obsolete” (“The California Way of Life”). The article introduced three families and their homes to the readers. As had been the case with the first installment of “LIFE Houses” before the United States entered the War, the author provided each family’s yearly income. That way, readers could decide for themselves whether a particular house was affordable to them.

The three homes introduced in the article belonged to families with yearly incomes of \$3,000 (Loeffler), \$10,000 (Campbell) and \$50,000 (Stothart). This put only the Loeffler family in an average income range. By the end of 1945, the median income in the United States per family unit was \$2,378, with about a third of all families earning between \$2,500 and \$5,000 per year. One in ten families was estimated to have a yearly income between

\$5,000 and \$10,000, and only 1.3% of U.S. families made more than \$10,000 a year, which puts the Campbells as well as the Stotharts into the top income tiers of their time (“Median Income for U.S. Families Jumps \$169 in ‘45”). The article glosses over the considerable differences in spending power among the three families featured. While the Loefflers’ home may be small, the article’s author points out the modern amenities it offers: an electric refrigerator, an electric range including a built-in clock and cooking lamp, and a washing machine. The description of the Campbells’ lifestyle is very similar, with a comparable focus on the modern household appliances found within their home which enable them to “get along without servants, do their own housework” (108). This allusion to appliances taking the role of servants is an interesting parallel to the way in which the matter was handled in previous years, discussed in chapter 1. The way in which this reference is used by the article’s author further seemingly equates the Loefflers and the Campbells: previously, families as well off as the Campbells would have a maid at their disposal, while the Loefflers would not have been able to afford the same luxury. By pointing to the absence of “servants”, the article implies that the gap in lifestyles between families like the Campbells and Loefflers supposedly narrowed. This aligns with an argument advanced by Thorstein Veblen decades earlier: “In the modern industrial communities the mechanical contrivances available for the comfort and convenience of everyday life are highly developed. So much so that body servants, or, indeed, domestic servants of any kind, would now scarcely be employed by anybody except on the ground of a canon of reputability carried over by tradition from earlier usage” (37). The difference between the Campbells and the Loefflers does not lie in their employment of domestic help; but rather in the size of their homes as well as other property owned (the Campbells own more cars than the Loefflers as well as horses). Be that as it may, the captions and choice of images clearly intends to minimize these differences. The same approach has been chosen for the Stotharts who earn \$50,000 a year. While the author admits that “The Herbert Stotharts are wealthy”, he goes on to explain how this family lives similarly to the other two families, only “on a higher scale” (111).

The article’s phrasing suggests that the major differences among these homeownership families lies not so much in their way of living, but rather in their mobility: while the Loefflers make do with one car, the Campbells own two of them. One car is used by Mrs. Campbell for her social life and shopping sprees. The Stotharts have four cars at their disposal. By describing it this way, the article appears to regard the number of cars to be the true status symbol here, while owning a comfortable and modern home is a simple given. This is reinforced by the way in which the three homes are initially represented to the reader

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(Figures 2.13-2.15). The Stothart home in particular is shown from an angle that makes it appear almost as compact as the Loefflers’ house. Only additional pictures, showing the back of the house with its spacious patio and large pool as well as the luxurious living room, emphasize the substantial differences of income and lifestyle between these three families. So while the stratification among homeowners is implied and can be discerned through a careful reading, on the surface, *LIFE* appears to suggest that to some extent all homeowners belong to the same class.

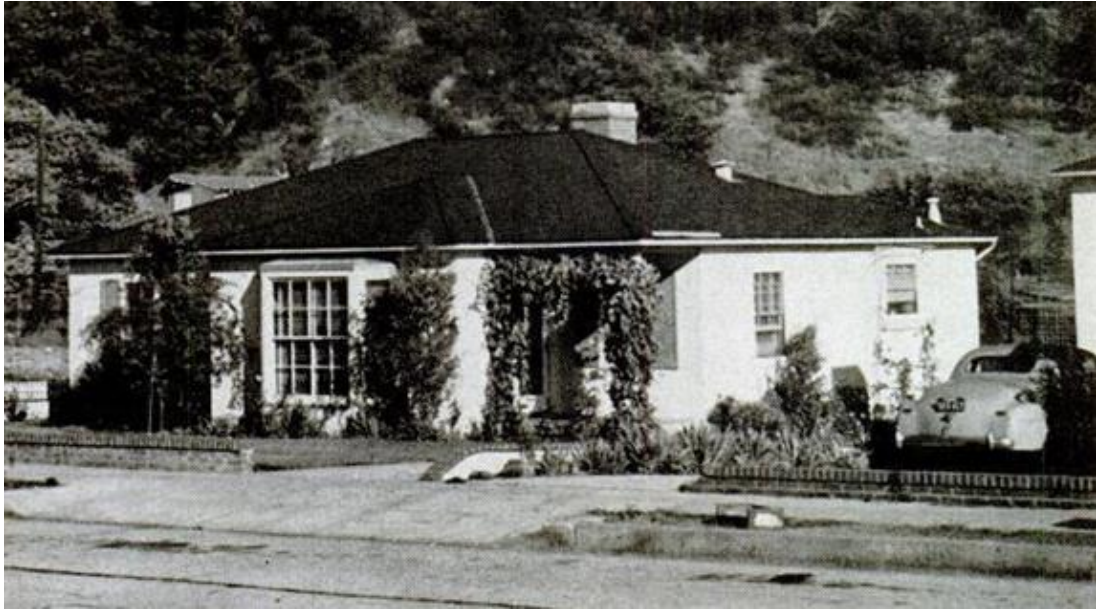


Figure 2.13: The Loeffler house is the only of the three houses discussed shown from the front and in full – possibly so as to make it appear a little bigger and thus minimize the differences in size among the three houses.

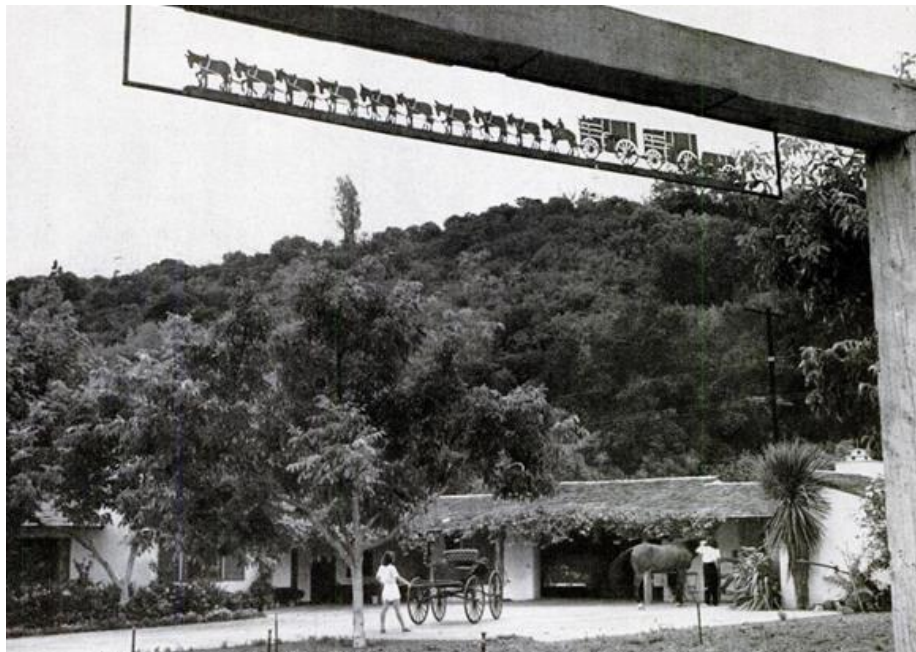


Figure 2.14: The Campbell house is not shown in full; it remains hidden behind trees and the focus remains on the garage and horse stables.



Figure 2.15: The Stothart Home is shown from the backyard only – possibly as a means to minimize the difference from the Loefflers’ much cheaper house.

A few months after “The California Way of Life”, *LIFE*’s readers were introduced to “Ideas for Houses”, a condensation of the book *Tomorrow’s House* by George Nelson and Henry Wright. Both authors were employed by Henry Luce: Nelson was an editor for *Fortune* while Wright was managing editor for *Architectural Forum*, *LIFE*’s sister magazine, referred to in chapter 1. Consequently, the book conveyed much the same messages on the topic of homeownership as *LIFE* did, and the magazine dedicated twelve whole pages to the book’s ideas. The article began with a condemnation of the homes Americans were living in at that particular moment: “The houses we have built in the last 50 years and are now beginning to build again are decades behind the technical possibilities of our time. Tomorrow’s house, the modern house, can be built right now” (Nelson & Wright 114). Once again, the comforts afforded by modern gadgets played a significant role in this discussion of homeownership. Furthermore, the authors called for more spacious homes which were to have more rooms as well as bigger rooms than had been customary before. One example of this is the introduction of the “family room”. This was to be a room in addition to a traditional living room or parlor so that parents could enjoy some privacy in the parlor while the children played in the family room. Kitchens and bathrooms were supposed to be larger than they had been until then. The kitchen, Nelson and Wright argued, was every woman’s “work center” in which she would spend “a disproportionate amount of time” (114). Therefore, kitchens should feel comfortable and be large enough to double as “playrooms” so that any good wife and mother could keep a

watchful eye on her children while preparing dinner – another indicator that the idealized role anticipated for women had not been altered perceptibly throughout the preceding war years.³⁶ Bathrooms, too, were deemed by Nelson and Wright to be too small, having been “designed to contain fixtures and not people. Consequently they are always too small” (Nelson & Wright 114).

Interestingly, Nelson and Wright suggested that the primary obstacle to having “the modern house” built was not the construction industry or an absence of ideas, but rather current homeowners themselves. Since the modern house was, supposedly, “an unconventional one” (Nelson & Wright 124), suburbs’ inhabitants tended to protest the construction of a modern house in their neighborhood as they felt it would “destroy the homogeneity of the entire neighborhood” (Nelson & Wright 124). Nelson and Wright also claimed that it might prove a challenge to secure the necessary financing for a modern house because bankers might fail to recognize the value of the modern design. In 1936, Henry Luce had advertised *LIFE* as providing its readers with the possibility “to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed” (Smith 28). This self-appointed mission of *LIFE* is manifested clearly in Nelson and Wright’s book and thus also in the excerpt printed within *LIFE*: throughout the article, the reader is called upon to rethink his notion of what a house should look like and what it should offer its inhabitants. Nelson and Wright urge the reader to keep asking for “the modern house” to initiate a new way of thinking about housing: “Tomorrow’s house will never come all at once. It will grow, item by item, year by year. But with what we now know about planning and materials and what architects have learned from industry, the house that can be built right now is a pretty wonderful thing” (126). The wording in this quote is remarkable: by describing the development of Tomorrow’s House as a growth process, Nelson and Wright suggest that increasingly modern and spacious homes are the result of a natural progression. Following this train of thought, the housing industry has no choice but to continually improve home designs, increasing the standard of living for increasing numbers of homeowners. Once again, this draws a distinct line between owners and renters, because renters are not depicted as beneficiaries of Tomorrow’s House.

³⁶ This is also striking insofar as it means that a middle class housewife is not expected to spend her time leisurely, but rather working within the household: “Instead of simply passing her time in visible idleness, as in the best days of the patriarchal regime, the housewife of the advanced peacable stage applies herself assiduously to household cares” (Veblen 54).

Nelson and Wright are not alone among their contemporaries in suggesting that true comfort and modernity can only be attained with homeownership. One example of this is a leaflet published by the Small Homes Council of the University of Illinois in 1946. Initially, the leaflet states: “most people can rent living quarters for less than the cost usually incurred when they own and maintain a home” (“Home Ownership is Economical”). But what can a rented home really provide its inhabitants? The leaflet moves on to point out: “One’s standards of values in a home almost invariably rise with home ownership. He wants a fireplace, an extra bath or lavatory, a recreation room, a study and so on. How many rented homes have those accommodations?” (“Home Ownership is Economical”). The suggested answer to this rhetorical question would be “none”, so if one truly wishes to enjoy more space or comfort, homeownership appears to be the only option. As suggested by the article on Tomorrow’s House, as well as the leaflet just quoted from, now was the time to take the money one could not spend during the war years and use it to purchase a house. Alternately, if one already owned a home, now was the time to modernize it (as opposed to simply applying necessary paint jobs).

“The Great Housing Shortage” and Veteran Homeowners

While the previously quoted articles suggest that the end of the war set off an immediate building boom, this was not the case. In December, 1945, *LIFE* bemoaned how “[the] nation last week suddenly found itself in the middle of an acute housing shortage. The shortage had been predicted for many months. But when it came the nation was shocked and bewildered by it” (“The Great Housing Shortage” 27). The articles consisted mostly of illustrated graphs and numbers, which added up to the article’s key argument: in order to solve the housing shortage as quickly as possible, construction activities had to pick up considerably. Even so, the author argued, considering that national income could be expected to rise, the proportion spent on housing would not exceed that spent on housing in the 1920s (Figure 2.16).

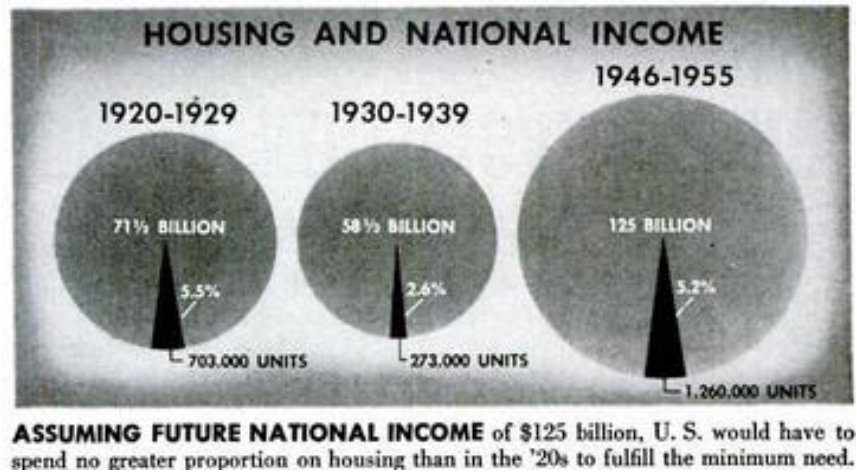


Figure 2.16: *LIFE* used graphs to illustrate its claim that the housing shortage could be solved without using a larger proportion of the national income than before.

Chapter 1 of this thesis discussed how rural housing and homes affordable with average incomes had often been found to be inadequate and out of date. The war effort had cut short any attempts to resolve that issue. In addition to general population growth, the high marriage rate throughout the war years had led to an increase in young couples eager to live in their own homes. As a result, people still had to double up, and some lived in trucks. According to *LIFE*, some couples and families were so desperate to find places to live that they visited undertakers to gain information on newly vacant apartments and houses (“The Great Housing Shortage” 29).³⁷ The high demand and low supply of homes caused housing prices to rise to unprecedented levels: in some areas, homes sold for double their pre-war prices (“The Great Housing Shortage” 30), and *LIFE* blamed the construction industry for failing to streamline construction sufficiently so as to build more quickly while also driving down prices. The author suggested that the only way to get a handle on the housing shortage was the nationwide use of prefabricated houses (“The Great Housing Shortage” 27).³⁸

Throughout 1945 and 1946, the housing shortage indeed reached national levels, after it had been mostly limited to defense production centers throughout the war years, and it was exacerbated by the numbers of returning veterans. P.M. Hauser and A.J. Jaffe, statisticians

³⁷ Despite much rhetoric surrounding the necessity of boosting construction activity throughout the nation, the shortage continued in 1947 as home-building efforts remained limited to “a shoe-string basis” (Phillips). Throughout these years, newspapers featured stories on people who found their own solutions to dealing with the shortage. One newspaper clipping tells the story of two families turning a large barn into two residential units (“Cut Barn in Half, Remodel into Two Barrington Homes”). Others took more drastic measures—one article introduced the reader to Mrs. Louise Grabow, a 38-year old divorcee and a “victim of the housing shortage” who offered “to marry any man of good character who would provide her with a home”. The article quoted Mrs. Grabow as saying, “I will be a good wife to whomever I marry” (“Offers to Wed to Get Home for Family”).

³⁸ According to one article, homes in Washington D.C. which had been valued around \$8,500 before the war, were offered for \$13,000 by January of 1946, despite the fact that they were now older than before and had not undergone any significant modernization efforts (“Texas Members of Congress Don’t Live in Mansions”).

from the U.S. Bureau of the Census estimated that overall there were 40.3 million dwelling units in the United States (Hauser & Jaffe 6). However, not all of these units were inhabitable, “and those inhabitable varied greatly in quality” (Hauser & Jaffe 9). Based on 1945 census findings, Hauser and Jaffe estimated that about 20% of dwelling units were not habitable, which left 32.24 million inhabitable housing units for an estimated 41.3 million households (Hauser & Jaffe 5-11). Overall, the authors estimated that an additional 8 to 12 million dwelling units were required (Hauser & Jaffe 12). There were, of course, local variations: due to the very high-volume migratory movement during the Great Depression and the subsequent war years, some areas certainly boasted vacant housing but no demand. However, according to Hauser and Jaffe, in many cases these vacant housing units were outdated and deemed substandard:

It should be observed, however, that in general, the areas of greatest out-migration are areas with the highest proportion of housing which would be adjudged substandard by any criteria. The general character of population movements in this country tend, therefore, not to produce housing surpluses in areas of out-migration as much as to create greater deficits in areas of in-migration. (Hauser & Jaffe 14)

LIFE's article on the Great Housing Shortage ended with an editorial entitled “Housing: What Can Be Done?” and it appealed to the reader’s nationalism by reminding him that many of those looking for homes were indeed returning war veterans:

‘To build a little house’ was one of the most recurrent dreams of our soldiers and sailors during the war. Many a sketch has been drawn in barracks or hospital and many a plot picked out or even bought; for land and imagination are still plentiful in America. All that stands in the way is the backwardness of the building industry.

It is noteworthy that the editorial suggested building “a little house” was on American soldiers’ minds during the war, while the magazine was simultaneously showing its readers modern and spacious “homes of tomorrow”. Not only did the editorial talk of “little” homes, but it also assured readers how land and imagination were still “plentiful” in America. By contrasting the “little” dream with “plentiful” resources at hand to fulfill these dreams, the editorial’s author underscored his claim that the only problem in giving returning veterans what they wanted was the construction industry’s backwardness.

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The editorial’s suggestion that soldiers throughout the war dreamt about becoming homeowners was not based on any hard data and through my research I could not find any nationwide surveys mentioned in U.S. media during those years that supported this claim. To the contrary: According to a survey by the U.S. Savings and Loan League, only approximately 10% of 12,000,000 veterans were interested in building or buying a home. Yet that same survey estimated that if provided with access to the necessary funds, veterans would account for “at least 50% of the purchasing and financing of homes” over the next ten years (“Many Veterans Would Have Own Homes”).

Consequently, homeownership played a prominent role in the rehabilitation program for wounded G.I.s and their wives in convalescent hospitals. Among other things, this program was comprised of home-planning courses which covered topics such as orientation on the G.I. Bill of Rights, FHA loans and other financing options. Afterwards, couples were given time and opportunity to spend “several days in the reference library scanning and studying magazines, plans and scrapbooks. When the general style floor plan and budget for the home had been selected with the instructor’s assistance, the couple worked jointly on the details of final construction and interior decoration plans”. The blueprints of the house plans could be taken home to be put into action as early as possible. These steps were particularly helpful in strengthening marriages that had been challenged by the trials and separations of war: “The psychological value of such an activity, based on a mutual interest, was tremendous. Working together on their ‘own home’ cleared up many petty misunderstandings, restored mutual confidence and alleviated fears and inhibitions” (Rusk).

The Home Ownership Provisions of the G.I. Bill of Rights³⁹ provided veterans with government-guaranteed loans for buying or building homes as well as for investing in home improvements. Under the Bill, the government guaranteed 50% of a loan up to \$2,000 and guaranteed to pay the first year’s interest rate. Veterans had up to two years after their date of discharge to apply for these loans (“The ‘G.I. Bill of Rights’” 363-364).

Various companies expected veterans to buy homes or to improve the homes they owned with the money backed by the U.S. government. One example of this is the Westinghouse Electric Corporation which announced in August 1945 a plant expansion program estimated to cost around \$11,000,000: “They are convinced demobilized veteran

³⁹ “The G.I. Bill communicated to participating male veterans that they were ‘first class’ citizens, worthy of the government’s interest and investment” (Murray 968). For more on this, see also Mettler, Suzanne: *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford University Press: 2005).

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home owners will be in the market for modern improvements” (Tucker). Other companies followed suit, and loan corporations targeted mostly veterans in the post-war years. The advertisement by the Homestead Building and Loan Corporation (Figure 2.17) portrayed the purchase of a home by veterans as an easy feat by choosing the wording “on the march to home-ownership”. Not only does the term “march” contain a military reference; it also implies that homeownership could be achieved through a simple, almost automated, action.⁴⁰ Another way to interpret the depiction of veterans “marching” to homeownership could be the suggestion that homeownership was a duty to perform now that they were civilians and no longer had military duties. It was hoped that the G.I. Bill of Rights “fostered in these male beneficiaries positive feelings towards the program and the government; that, in turn, spurred their active participation in civic and political groups” (Murray 968). This would make them desirable homeowners who could emerge as community leaders in the postwar world. Other such advertisements aiming at veterans focused on additional aspects of homeownership. One example of this is the advertisement for First Federal below (Figure 2.18). This advertisement depicts a G.I. and his family enjoying the comforts of homeownership (and consumerism). This ties in nicely with the approach of convalescent centers to use the dream of homeownership as a means to speed up recovery and to repair marriages that had been challenged by the circumstances of wartime (discussed above). The advertisement also references the G.I. Bill of Rights, and the “privileges” it grants to the veterans, emphasizing their “specialness”.

VETS
ON THE MARCH
TO
HOME-OWNERSHIP

MORTGAGE
LOAN
HEADQUARTERS
TAKES THE LEAD!

IN 1946
\$731,500.00
WAS LOANED
TO
128
VETERANS

1. Large enough to serve you.
2. Small enough to know you.
3. Strong enough to protect you.
4. Old enough to guide you!

Homestead Building & Loan
"The Home of Home Financing"
7 South Street MIDDLETOWN Dial 6820

Figure 2.17: Most loan agencies chose to target veterans in their advertisements.

⁴⁰ This very easy appeal permeated homeownership rhetoric for decades to come.



Figure 2.18: In contrast to the war-rhetoric employed in loan agency ads during the war, ads targeting veterans were often accompanied by allusions to a peaceful and harmonious family life to be enjoyed within one's own home.

While *LIFE*'s editorial "Housing: What Can be Done?" and the advertisements displayed above called for enabling veterans to become homeowners as quickly and easily as possible, some contemporaries cautioned against this mindset and rather recommended tenant status for veterans to begin with: "Nearly all of us were guilty of the sentimentality after the war which said our veterans should own their own homes. It was a beautiful and patriotic picture, but romantic and unreal" (Graves). In the same piece, the author suggested that ownership, after all, was not the right approach to put an end to this severe housing shortage:

How about changing a few "For Sale" signs to "For Rent" in this land of the free and home of the young and itinerant veteran? [...] Who is responsible for the economic mistake of stressing home-ownership in post-war plans to house our veterans when all the circumstances of youth, low income and migration suggested home-rental as the sensible way, is not the point now. (Graves)

This opinion was not popular, however, and despite few choices and high prices, veterans were continuously encouraged to become homeowners.⁴¹ In its editorial on the Housing Shortage, *LIFE* had also not featured this viewpoint. Instead, the editorial’s author suggested that American consumers only had to make their demands for modern and affordable housing (ownership) options heard to get what they wanted. According to the mindset exhibited within the editorial and throughout subsequent *LIFE* issues, tenancy was not the solution:

In this present crisis the consumer can do little but burn and yell, which is his right and duty. But let him also insist where and when he can o[w]n more for his money, keep a lookout for signs of improvement and take closer interest in his house and all that’s in it. If he keeps at it, in the long run the consumer can again be boss in America. (“Housing: What Can Be Done?”)

Two years later, in April 1947, this statement was reiterated in a *LIFE* article. The article was entitled “LIFE Presents Three Modern Houses - They are the Kind of Homes U.S. Now Can Have”, and the argument stated within the headline was repeated in the article itself: “The U.S. can have home like these. It has only to ask architects and builders for them. Otherwise the nation may be cluttered with ill-built, ill-designed houses like those that sprang up after the last war” (“LIFE Presents Three Modern Houses...”⁷⁷). By suggesting that “The U.S.” could acquire homes such as these, headline and article insinuated that the general population could have such access. At the same time, it implicitly set the United States as a country apart from other countries, implying that “the U.S.” could afford these homes while other countries could not.

One of the homes introduced in this piece, is the so-called “Minimum House”, which starts out with one room to be expanded into a four-room house if necessary. The one-room option can be built for \$7,000 and could be extended into its three-bedroom version with an

⁴¹ The housing shortage hit tenants especially hard, as renters were evicted with new homeowners requesting to inhabit newly purchased homes themselves. Between August 1945 and February 1946, requests for renter evictions tripled (“OPA Reports Crisis in Housing Shortage”). Usually, tenants were given six months’ notice to leave the homes. This did not apply if the new homeowner was a veteran – in these cases, renters were supposed to leave the homes in shorter time periods. Since many of these renters were themselves veterans, however, the housing situation was hardly an issue of veterans versus nonveterans, but rather one of renters versus owners, with renters, regardless of their previous efforts and sacrifices for the United States, finding themselves on the losing side. In an ironic twist, even politicians were afflicted the housing shortage. In January 1946, the Governor of Arizona was forced to move out of his rental in the state’s capital because it had been “sold over his head”. According to one article on the issue, the Governor was planning to move into a hotel for the time being because he was unable to find another rental (“Housing Shortage Hits Governor of Arizona”).

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additional \$3,500. The article added that, if prefabricated, the house could be built at an even lower cost – approximately \$5,500 (86). To illustrate how feasible such prefabrication was, *LIFE* added an image featuring all parts needed to construct the home (Figure 2.19). As mentioned above, the median income per household amounted to approximately \$2,378 per year, which made the \$5,500 basic house easily affordable to the median income family.

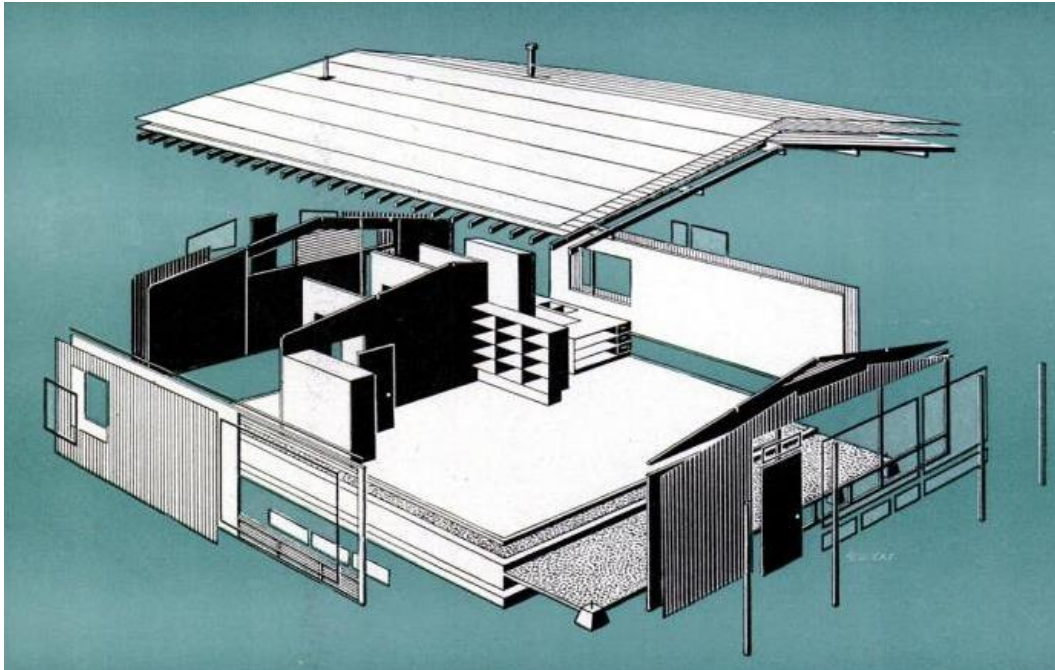


Figure 2.19: In an effort to illustrate the possibilities of prefabricated housing, *LIFE* editors incorporated somewhat technical drawings to convince readers of the practicality of this approach to home construction.

While “*LIFE Presents Three Modern Homes*” once more suggested that housing costs could be brought down by streamlining construction processes and offering prefabricated homes to families with moderate incomes, some contemporaries suggested that the easy availability of loans, rather than the construction industry, was responsible for high housing prices. Between September 1946 and September 1947, home loans granted by Federal Savings and Loan Associations had increased by 41%, which, according to an article in *The New York Times*, “was spurred by veterans taking advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights” (“Home Loans Set Record”). In December, 1947, Franklin D. Richards, commissioner of the Federal Housing Administration, warned that “In the enthusiasm of having a home of their own, families may be overly optimistic as to what amount they can afford to pay for it” (“Home Ownership in Budget Range, FHA Head Advises”). One *New York Times* article quoted a chairman of the First National Bank of Chicago as complaining about housing loans being “in excess of either the cost of the property mortgaged to secure them, or of its reasonable value. They can only result in loss to the buyer and to the Government on its

guarantees”. He called upon Congress to reconsider “the entire field of Government aids in the field of housing credit” (“Small Rise Backed in Discount Rate”). In an attempt to curb rising real estate prices, the federal government curtailed some of the loan provisions for veterans by stopping the FHA from taking mortgages. Some counties also altered their policies by requiring down payments instead of permitting veterans to purchase homes with no down payment whatsoever. The primary reason given for this change in policy was the severe inflation of housing prices: “Housing is overpriced. Lenders are less inclined to risk their money on a \$5,000 home that is being sold to a G.I. at a price of \$8,000 to \$10,000” (“No Down Payments Thing of Past for County Veterans”). This does not mean, however, that G.I. loans in general were discontinued. They remained an integral part of the treatment of U.S. war veterans. In 1951, for example, more GI home loans were granted than in any of the years immediately following the wars (“Home Loans for Veterans”).

Concluding Remarks

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, my research made one thing abundantly clear: the war exacerbated tensions between different classes and races of American society. According to Leff, this is a natural phenomenon to be observed in most nations at war. However, I find it particularly striking to view these tensions with a special focus on homeownership notions. Throughout the war, the O.W.I. and *LIFE Magazine* called on homeowners to do their share by leading a frugal life and by focusing on self-sufficiency to the highest possible degree. In addition, *LIFE* projected the white, middle class homeowner as fighting “not the least part of the battle” throughout these years. Many of the images I discussed from this time period appealed to romanticized notions of life at the frontier, which featured do-it-yourself elements but none of the hardships actually endured in those times. Despite this, many homeowners certainly felt that they were making sacrifices – as expressed by Mrs. Smith and illustrated in the story of the fictitious Mr. Waltham and his family. This may well have contributed to a sense of betrayal that, while services for homeowners were cut back, the war workers, who streamed into production centers, received government housing in addition to their high wages. Eventually, this would lead to swelling homeownership ranks among the working class as well as returning war veterans who received special financing benefits through the GI Bill of Rights.

At the same time, there is a growing sense of stratification among homeowners. The story “The California Way of Life” featuring three homeowners with incomes ranging from median to very high, is indicative of that. It seems as if homeownership in and of itself is

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slowly losing its status as an indicator of prestige and middle-class status. Other factors, such as age and location of one’s house as well as number of cars or the like, are being considered as well. This trend continues in the 1950s, and will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: “It is a way of living that a man and a woman buy when they buy a house” – Differentiation among Homeowners (1948-1958)

In 1948, *LIFE* provided its readers with impressions and conclusions from a panel of housing experts in an article entitled “A LIFE Table Round Table on Housing” (Davenport). The findings presented in this article set the tone for the portrayal of homeownership within the magazine for years to come. The direction which *LIFE* was about to take in its representations of the topic of homeownership was summarized in one sentence within the article: “It is a way of living that a man and a woman buy when they buy a house” (Davenport 85). This “way of living” included aspects such as traditional gender roles, and it also presented a much more lavish lifestyle to be desirable and attainable for the new American middle class than had been the case before. For the first time since its inception, *LIFE* explicitly drew and affirmed class lines among homeowners, thus incorporating wider discourses on class differentiation within American society. This chapter explores how this was done, and identifies possible causes of this trend. In so doing, it addresses questions such as: How did representations of homeownership factor into the construction of middle class and to what extent did the Cold War play a role in this? What was the “way of living” associated with homeownership according to *LIFE* and in what way had this projected way of living changed since the peace time era before the War?

LIFE emerged from the war years as one of the nation’s most popular magazines, having reached millions with its illustrated coverage of World War II. Looking back on the war years, Henry Luce stated: “We did not plan *LIFE* as a war magazine [...] that’s the way it turned out to be” (Baughman 44). As shown in the previous chapter, *LIFE*’s representations of homeownership throughout the war had been congruent with messages emanating from the OWI and other government sources. With the war years and prescribed austerity behind them, *LIFE* rephrased its messages, catering specifically to a certain readership: college-educated households with above-average incomes keen on getting to spend. A 1954-1955 examination of magazine readership in nonfarm households found that the percentage of *LIFE* readers rose with each income category “then began falling” (Baughman 44), establishing it squarely as a middle-income-range magazine. The 1954-55 median income of *LIFE* readers amounted to \$5,425 (Baughman 44), while the national median income of 1955 amounted to \$2,323 according to the Bureau of the Census (“Median Income Up \$22”).

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Throughout the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, President Truman’s administration had restricted access to credit supply so as to free up critical construction materials for use in the war. In a speech on July 26, 1950, he explained this approach to the populace:

The construction industry, which is now operating at very high levels, is also a major user of critical materials. With respect to types of housing credit extended directly or guaranteed or insured by Federal agencies, I have already directed that limitations be imposed [...] Further authority to restrict real estate credit, particularly privately financed loans, should be granted [...] These general restraining measures will reduce total demand, and thus release materials for military uses. (Truman)

In 1953, the Korean War came to a quick end as Truman’s successor, President Eisenhower, obtained a truce. With defense spending declining, the economy slid into a recession (Holmans 36). As a result, the Eisenhower administration focused on “bolstering confidence about the transition from heavy defense spending to a more normal peacetime economy” (Holmans 41). In an effort to revive the economy, government purchases were increased, providing banks with ample reserves for loans. In addition, restrictions on consumer credit were lifted, making credit more easily available than ever before (Holmans 39-42). On January 25, 1954, Eisenhower held a speech before Congress which was reprinted in newspapers across the nation, in which he formulated the goal that every American family should own its home, making him the first U.S. president to voice this goal explicitly:

[A] high level of housing construction and vigorous community development are essential to the economic and social well being of our country.

It is, therefore, properly a concern of this government to insure that opportunities are provided [for] every American family to acquire a good home. [...] The Federal government must provide aggressive and positive leadership. At the same time actions and programs must be avoided that would make our citizens increasingly dependent upon the Federal government to supply their housing needs. We believe that needed progress can best be made by full and effective utilization of our competitive economy with its vast resources for building and financing homes for our people.

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This illustrates Eisenhower’s attempt to “bolster confidence”: the president refers to the “vast” resources of the American economy and praises the “competitive” U.S. economy. It is important to remember an additional aspect about this time period, because it helps to fully understand Eisenhower’s above-quoted statement as well as the explicit focus on class lines present in *LIFE* throughout the 1950s: Eisenhower and his administration perceived communism as a “monolithic” threat (Wright, Robert 279) and they followed a course of “hardline anticommunism” (McAuliffe 630). This explains the strong aversion of his administration to public housing programs which his administration deemed to be mostly socialistic. Eisenhower believed in the healing powers of a “competitive” (read: “capitalistic”) economy to address America’s housing needs, and to lead to the economic and social well-being of the nation.

Just how critical Eisenhower was of public housing programs becomes apparent when looking at his housing policies. His Housing Act of 1954 authorized the construction of a total of 35,000 public housing units over the course of one year, while the construction of 35,000 per year for four years had been called for. In 1949, President Truman’s Taft-Ellender-Wagner-Act had authorized 135,000 public housing units per year for seven years. While it should be noted that only 35,000 of these desired 945,000 units had indeed been constructed, the fact that such an enormous amount of public housing had been approved by Truman underscores the change in attitudes towards public housing under Eisenhower (Holmans 43).

However, Eisenhower did provide government aid to enable the utilization of the “competitive economy” to build and finance American homes. Between June, 1953 and August 1954, reserve requirements for banks were reduced four times while open market purchases were increased to provide “ample reserves” for banks (Holmans 42). Conditions for mortgages issued by the FHA and the VA were also eased and as a result, the amount of home loans by these two providers rose from 39% in 1953 to 48% in 1954, according to the *Economic Report of the President* from 1955 (quoted in Holmans 55). By guaranteeing millions of inexpensive mortgages, both policies “promoted mass homeownership” (Logemann 528). Overall, credit conditions were made “as easy as it was possible to make them” which was “a major factor in the increase in housing construction that played an important part in the recovery from the recession” (Holmans 41). But it was not just real estate loans; the Federal Reserve also lifted wartime restrictions on consumer credit aimed to “promote economic growth and to expand mass purchasing power” (Logemann 528).

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And yet, while these steps had already been taken when Eisenhower made the statement quoted above, he did not talk about the government’s actions with regard to fiscal regulations, but rather portrayed the American free market economy as the solution to the problem. By attributing such “healing powers” to it, Eisenhower underscored the supposed superiority of capitalism over communism.

Eisenhower’s speech focused mostly on the need for an increase in housing construction. While he did mention that it was important to assist people in acquiring a “good” home, he did not elaborate on what exactly constituted such a “good” home. As Chester Rapkin, a research associate of the Institute for Urban Land Use and Housing Studies of Columbia University, pointed out in 1955:

A new house does not necessarily mean an adequate house. At recent Congressional hearings many home owners in various sections of the country presented evidence of inadequate construction and rapid deterioration. Moreover, many of the new houses are poorly located or are too small. (Rapkin 141)

LIFE and others picked up on this and provided readers with impressions of homes that could possibly qualify as “good” (while also discussing supposedly “bad” housing options): the ideal house supposedly contributed to family harmony and stability, while also indicating one’s social status and providing one with the utmost level of comfort. In the late 1930s, *LIFE* had featured homes to be owned that were confined in space and focused mostly on providing homeownership opportunities to low-income families (in addition to higher priced options). By the 1950s, this changed – homeownership on *LIFE*’s pages had become a middle class game, and homes recommended by the magazine’s authors were spacious and modern and came with a corresponding price tag attached.

LIFE’s Roundtable on Housing

In 1949, *LIFE* featured a round table on issues of housing to which it had invited “experts” on housing matters including directors of development companies such as William Levitt, whose Levittowns had sprung up across the country by that point and whose company *Levitt and Sons* was the nation’s largest house builder.⁴² The group also included loan corporation employees, journalists such as John Normile, the building editor of the magazine

⁴² The first Levittown (consisting of 17,500 houses) was constructed by *Levitt and Sons* between 1947 and 1951 on Long Island, New York. It was hailed for its low-cost nature of construction and materials as affordable for blue-collar, lower income families (Kelly 27).

*Better Homes and Gardens*⁴³, Henry Wright from the *Architectural Forum*. The event was moderated by Russell Davenport, editor of *Fortune Magazine*. All journalists present were part of the Luce publishing empire so that they would very likely agree with the general viewpoints on housing portrayed by *LIFE*. While the planning and construction of homes remained as much in the hands of men as did access to financing options, *LIFE* focused to a large extent on the happy housewives in well planned homes. Hence, the article on the round table devoted a few paragraphs to a discussion preceding the Round Table in which a group of women representing “the consumer”, was asked their opinions on soundly designed housing options. This group of women “was composed of 10 housewives [...] who take an intelligent interest in the housing question” (Davenport 77). The fact that these women were selected for their “intelligent” interest in housing suggests a prevailing view that women in general did not know what was best for them and their homes, even though they spent most of their time at home and did most of the housework.

Not only were the participating women singled out due to their “intelligent” interest, but they were also special in the sense that they did not represent the average American housewife. Rather, their families’ incomes were above average, as were the prices of their homes, ranging from \$10,000 for a prefabricated house, to \$25,000 for a “nine-room modern custom-built house, designed for its site”. The 1949 average family income amounted to \$3,100 (“Average Family Income...”) with which you could safely purchase a house valued up to \$7,750. Clearly, even the cheapest house owned by one of these women, worth \$10,000, was out of reach for the average American family. These women did not rely on the mass-production and prefabrication of homes to be able to afford them, which may very well explain their opinion about this aspect of home construction: “When confronted with the prospect of the standardization of their homes, these ladies were anything but enthusiastic” (Davenport 78).⁴⁴ Instead they proposed the opposite:

Almost all of these ladies regarded a house as something which must have an individual character. [...] Many of them stressed the fact that the house exerts profound influences upon the children, just as important as their official education. There should therefore be beauty in the surroundings and charm in the home. (Davenport)

⁴³ While beginning circulation in 1922, it was post-war prosperity that brought *Better Homes and Gardens* into a considerable amount of America households. By 1960, it would be America’s “largest and most conspicuous successful home service magazine, with a circulation of about five million copies” (Roland 350).

⁴⁴ It should be noted that one of them was mentioned as being enthusiastic about her own prefabricated house. However, she was singled out as being an exception.

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The “individual” character referred to by these women must be regarded as hypothetical: even homes in higher priced neighborhoods were often very similar if not identical to the neighboring housing units. This is discussed at greater length in this chapter.

The claim that the home influences children “profoundly” was not a new development of the time. Rather, it dates back to housing discourses of the early twentieth century. For example, a 1909 newspaper article on how to build a satisfactory home devoted more than half of its pages to the proper upbringing of children, focusing on their moral development and the type of house in which they could develop “strong moral character” and be instructed in “the virtues of truthfulness, justice, self-control, purity, self-respect, obedience” (Dwyer). Interestingly, all of these virtues were outlined by Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography, which include temperance, resolution, sincerity, chastity and so on (Franklin 69-70). In the 1920s, eugenicists referred to the ownership of a sound home as a “major factor in promoting the healthy growth of genetically sound children” (Monkkonen 187), and in 1931 *The Better Homes Manual* explained how “the home is the environment in which the life and development of the child are determined” (quoted in Monkkonen 187). Furthermore, the choice of words employed by the 1949 panel of housewives is noteworthy: they talked about “beauty” and “charm” that had to be present in a home. This echoes rhetoric used by the 1920s Better Homes Movement, which had been founded by Mrs. William Maloney in 1922. The Movement’s goals included the objective to “make convenient, attractive, and wholesome homes accessible to all American families” (*Better Homes in America* 7).

Throughout the late 1940s, prefabricated housing was criticized in U.S. media, which admonished that it remained far behind the high expectations it had been greeted with throughout the war years, and the lack of individuality was prominent among the grievances: “Anyone buying a prefabricated house was forced to accept a prearranged floor plan, which left him with little more flexibility of plan arrangement than the buyer who elects to buy a house already in place” (Hutchins). A 1951 article in the *Journal of Home Economics* bemoaned the static sameness of American housing with scathing sarcasm:

[Surveying] some of the recently built homes around us one might conclude that they are planned for anything but human occupancy. It is surprising that some of these structures maintain their equilibrium, to say nothing of the equilibrium of the family within. (Salmon 633)

According to the author, the main difficulty with building good homes was that “we are trying to house a dynamic family within a static structure. We must, therefore, produce a house that is as flexible as possible” (Salmon 634).⁴⁵ The article subsequently praised modern home design for adjusting homes to family needs so that families would no longer have to adjust to their homes: “Plans are being humanized; they are being adjusted to family activities instead of outmoded requirements” (Salmon 716).

One example of the adjustment of homes to family needs can be found in Levittowns. While the first homes constructed in the mid- to late 1940s were mostly identical and inflexible boxes, later versions - such as the 1949-51 ranch-model structures – were more versatile. Collaborating with Wright, the Levitts had adapted “the concept of transformable space” (Kelly 28) with built in drawers, double-access fireplaces and windows that could be turned into archways leading into new extensions (Kelly). In addition, in meeting criticism of the general homogeneity of post war suburban subdivisions, a new Levittown constructed in New Jersey between 1955 and 1959, featured mixed housing types (consisting of three different models), ranging in price from \$11,500 to \$14,500 (Friedman 137).

Prefabricated and inflexible homes did not disappear entirely. In 1950, five per cent of all new single-family-home construction consisted of prefabricated homes – amounting to 50,000 prefabricated units being built. This success was attributed to the lower prices of these houses, ranging from \$5,000 to \$9,000 (“Whatever Happened to All the Prefabricated Houses?”). Considering how the average American family could afford a home costing up to \$7,750, these homes were affordable by many people as opposed to the costlier, and more individualized, homes called for by the “intelligently interested” housewives quoted in *LIFE* (even the Levitt homes, with their limited individualization potential and despite mass production, surpassed this price range). Prefabricated homes were “aimed directly at the working man’s budget” (Ferris), and enjoyed “an ever wider acceptance by the general public particularly families in the middle and lower income groups” who viewed “the prefabricated home as the logical answer to their problem of obtaining a quality home at a price within their means” (“Prefab Home Construction Triples Over Last Year”). Prefabricated homes also played a growing role in public housing options. Very few new public housing units were put

⁴⁵ In chapter 2, I quoted from a 1945 *LIFE* article on the book *Tomorrow’s House* by Nelson and Wright. It told the story of inhabitants of a certain suburb who were opposed to the construction of a modern type of home within their midst for fear of its destroying the neighborhood’s “homogeneity”. Such resistance continued into the 1950s. In November, 1950, Mary Gillies noted in the *Journal of Home Economics*: “Modern design in its true form is not yet accepted because it looks strange. The average person sees only an unfamiliar shape. He notes the absence of small-paned windows, white clapboards, and green shutters” (714).

up in the late 1950s. Clearly, projects to be subsidized by taxpayers for years to come, which had hardly ever been popular, were now much less so than ever before. One newspaper commentary remarked that “Everyone stands to lose when public housing is undertaken”, and it moved on: “No effort should ever be made in this country to permanently place in government housing the rank and file citizen who can afford to build his own home or rent privately-held property” (“More Housing Will Result From New Rent Law”). Once again, the main argument lay at defining who should be eligible for public housing, and who could afford to buy his own home, no matter how small it may be (“Co-Op Housing under Attack”). This rhetoric ties in well with the Eisenhower statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter, in which the president called for an end to public housing so as to avoid dependence on it. By 1958, the public housing program, according to one article, had “slowed to a crawl” (Dale). The few public housing projects that were put up consisted mostly of prefabricated housing, which was viewed as the cheapest option, further stigmatizing prefabricated homes as the poor man’s housing option (“U.S. Tries Prefab in Public Housing”). Prefabricated houses, therefore, served as a catalyst in the stratification among homeowners – those who could afford to do so, bought individualized homes, while the lower income classes, striving to join in on the supposed advantages of homeownership, settled for prefabricated homes. As a result, the house one owned, now more than ever, served to signify one’s position in society, with the home having become a good for *conspicuous consumption*. In preceding decades, homeownership in and of itself had been a status symbol. With homes reduced in size and price and accessible to more people than ever before, to own a home became less so. Consequently, it was of growing importance what kind of home one owned.

Previously, simply by addressing homeowners, *LIFE* had been addressing the white middle class. As lower income classes entered into homeownership, *LIFE*’s discourse on the topic targeted higher income groups more explicitly, and its condemnation of the supposedly less satisfying way of life associated with prefabricated homes was a first step into this direction.

Lower to Middle to Upper Class Homes: W. Lloyd Warner in LIFE

In 1949, the sociologist Milton Gordon observed in the *American Journal of Sociology* that, even though the Founding Fathers and early sociologists such as Veblen had devoted some attention to the question of how to define social class, there were no American “major schools of class research or theory” (263). As a result, “American sociology entered its second generation in the middle 1920s with class established as a necessary concept for the

analysis of economic stratification [...] but with little class research in progress, a minimum of theoretical consideration of the precise meaning of the term, and practically no recognition of the class framework as a major area of investigation within the discipline” (Gordon 263-4). This began to change in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s as American sociologists, particularly those at the University of Chicago, increasingly incorporated a class focus into their research. In 1929, the Lynds published their book *Middletown*, the socio-anthropological study of a Midwestern community “with a definite class focus” according to Gordon (264). Stimulated in part by the Depression, its governmental remedies, and a rise in industrial unionism, sociological studies throughout the 1930s focused increasingly on definitions and effects of class. According to Gordon, the 1940s “have witnessed a continuation of the upward trend in the quantity of research and theory with a class orientation” (Gordon 264). And yet, as observed by Gordon’s colleague Paul Hatt in the *American Sociological Review* in 1950, by the end of the 1940s there was still “no general agreement among sociologists [...] as to what factor or combination of factors delineates the social class” (Hatt 216). In the same year, Walter Goldschmidt, an anthropologist and sociologist at the University of California Los Angeles and later editor of *American Anthropologist*⁴⁶ remarked in “Social Class in America – a Critical Review” printed within that journal:

The lines of distinction between [...] classes are not sharply drawn, and class orientation is not fully achieved. It is a tendency rather than an accomplished system. An understanding of American society cannot be arrived at by asserting a fixity in class orientation; rather the fluidity of class position and the force of the cultural denial of class must always be kept in mind. (Goldschmidt 495)

I have referred to the fluidity as well as the cultural denial of class lines within U.S.-American society in the introduction to this dissertation, but it should be noted that in 1949, *LIFE* picked up on a system of dividing Americans into different social classes, and presented it to its readers as a valid approach to understanding American society.

The system had been devised by W. Lloyd Warner, a sociologist from the University of Chicago, and it was based on the anthropological approach to the class system that had been pioneered by *Middletown*. Warner based his class definitions on social, economic, attitudinal and cultural characteristics and chose four categories to distinguish between

⁴⁶ *American Anthropologist* is the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association.

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classes: occupation of the head of household, source of income (not the amount), kind of house, and the kind of neighborhood one lived in (Ferrero). It deserves some attention that Warner devised these categories based on people’s responses and personal impressions as to what, in their eyes, determined somebody’s status in society: “It is not an arbitrary system but reflects, in a kind of shorthand, what Warner and his assistants have heard people throughout the U.S. say about themselves” (“A sociologist looks at an American community” 109). Thus, Warner’s class system was based on people’s personal perceptions and ideas about status symbols that must have been influenced considerably by messages emanating from movies and magazines of the time.

Using this kind of system, Warner found there to be six different classes, which he referred to in an interview as “levels of social distinction” (Ferrero): a lower and upper lower class, a lower and upper middle class, as well as a lower and upper upper class. According to Warner, these classes did exist “despite the widely-accepted belief that ‘I’m as good as anybody else’” (Ferrero). Warner’s observations garnered nationwide attention, and *LIFE*, too, picked up on the story, featuring the article “A sociologist looks at an American community” in September of 1949.

One of the three towns in which Warner had conducted his study was Rockford, Illinois, and *LIFE* took its readers there, sorting different families into their respective classes based on Warner’s system. Since two out of four class-determining factors, according to Warner, were based on one’s home, the types of dwellings that the families lived in were featured prominently within the article. The two representatives of the lower class lived in rented quarters: Sam Sygulla, representing the “lower lower class”, lived in a rented trailer along with his wife and daughter. Alex Armato, a member of the “upper lower class” had rented a seven room house for his wife and children, which placed him nine points above Sygulla with regard to dwelling type. However, the neighborhood he lived in ranked just two points better than Sygulla’s, whose trailer was located in an old army camp. The fact that Armato’s residential area, located just across the tracks from Rockford’s main residential district, was rated only slightly better than that army camp was blamed on its racial diversity. The article specifically pointed out to the reader that “Negro families live on both sides” of Armato’s house (111). Warner based his classification categories on people’s personal opinions on status symbols. Therefore, it must have been a basic assumption among most people questioned by Warner that inhabiting a home with minority neighbors lowered one’s overall class status.

“A Way of Living”: Representations of Homeownership in *LIFE Magazine*

While African American soldiers, too, had fought in the War, they still remained absent from portrayals of homeownership and depictions of middle class lives. The first chapter to this dissertation discussed an advertisement for household appliances surrounding a block robot – alluding to the fact that African Americans generally entered white, prosperous, neighborhoods only for work as maids, nannies or cooks to the white homeowners. Twenty years later, this mindset had hardly changed among most white Americans. While there was in fact an African American middle class, it did not find its way into the mainstream discourse on class in America at the time. To be categorized as middle class according to Warner – and, it seems, according to *LIFE*, which does not feature a single portrait on a minority middle class family during that time – one’s own race is as determining a factor of class as the race of one’s neighbors. For an individual to qualify for middle class status according to *LIFE*’s interpretation of Warner’s system, both the individual and his neighbors must be white.

While the Sygullas and the Armatos were ranked as lower class, the Wentlands and the Frechs were designated as middle class. Stan Wentland owned a grocery store and lived with his family in an apartment above the store, which, according to *LIFE*’s reading of Warner’s study, qualified him as lower middle class. The Frech family, living in a suburban development called Rolling Green, was assigned upper middle class status by *LIFE*. The selection of images to depict the “ways of living” of these families draws striking contrasts among them.



Figure 3.1: Note the broom in the right hand corner of this image. It suggests a lack of modern appliances such as a vacuum cleaner as well as closet space to hide it in.

“A Way of Living”: Representations of Homeownership in *LIFE Magazine*



Figure 3.2: In order to illustrate how confined the Wentlands' space is, the photographer chose to show the whole family together in the living room.

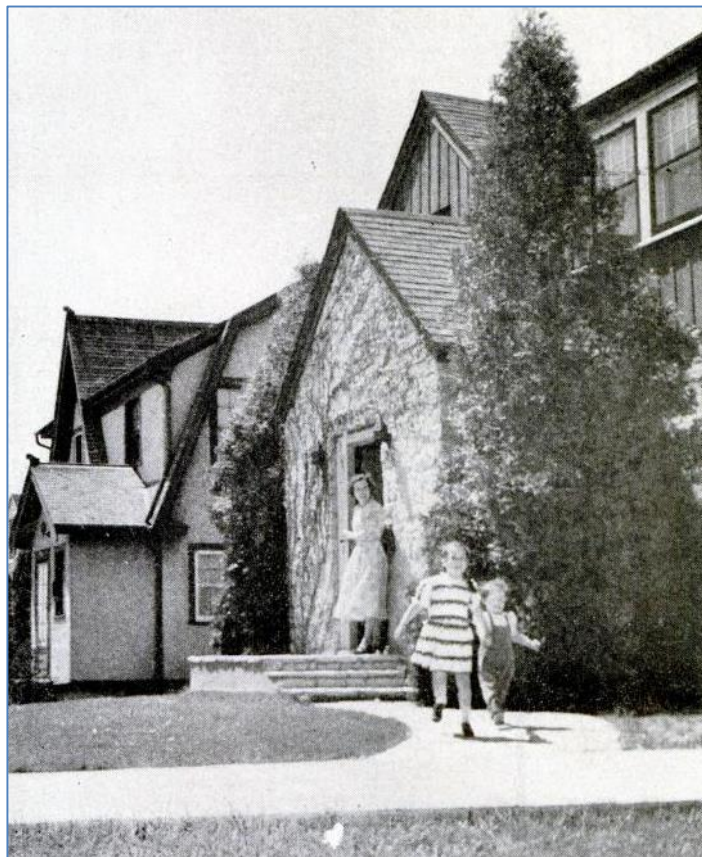


Figure 3.3: The image of the Frechs' house was so chosen that it indicated a spacious home as well as included the carefully manicured lawn and the equally nice neighboring home.

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The Sygullas’ trailer (Figure 3.1) is surrounded by other, bleak looking trailers. They are not rooted firmly to the ground but rather placed upon foundations that appear as if they could be removed quickly to move the trailer to a different place. This is noteworthy since homeownership was generally associated with civic involvement based on the idea that a homeowner took an avid interest in the area he will spend the rest of his life in. Previously, such preconceptions had been linked to land ownership.⁴⁷

There is no grass, there are no trees or flowers in sight – instead, there is a gas or water tank perched on the foundation of the Sygullas’ trailer, suggesting that their supply of gas and water is not as carefree as it is for the Frechs, but rather something they need to monitor and take care of on their own so as not to run out. The broom in the right-hand corner of the image suggests a lack of modern appliances such as a vacuum cleaner, as well as closet space in which it could be hidden away from view (consider especially the closet walls celebrated by *LIFE* a few years earlier, discussed in chapter 2).

The Wentlands, living on the second floor of the building housing their own store, are not pictured outside. Instead, *LIFE* editors chose to depict them in their living room. Unlike the Sygullas, who do not look at each other in the image portraying them, the Wentlands are shown looking at and talking as well as laughing with each other, suggesting a happy family life. However, the room looks somewhat cramped, an impression supported by the fact that the son to the right of the picture sits on a bar stool which he must have carried in from the kitchen. It seems as if the living room is not spacious enough to comfortably accommodate the whole family, let alone family and guests.

The Frechs, who are ascribed upper middle class status, inhabit their own home in a suburban neighborhood. The reader can only assume that their living room is more spacious than the Wentlands’, since the image provided (Figure 3.3) shows the outside of the home only. Unlike the Sygullas’ army camp, the Frechs’ neighborhood boasts carefully trimmed lawns and solid looking homes, as well as space for the children to roam. While the article’s general tone describing the Wentlands’ lifestyle was sympathetic, the article clearly favored the Frechs. Stan Wentland, the head of the household, is referred to as “a solid representative of that large group in U.S. society whose members are often labeled ‘the common man’” (113). This common man belongs to the town’s lodge of the Loyal Order of the Moose,

⁴⁷ This brings me back, once more, to the findings of the Public Lands Commission. Following their publication in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt had referred to them in his Annual Message in 1907: “The Government should part with its title [to land] only to the actual home-maker, not to the profit-maker who does not care to make a home” (Roosevelt).

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where he helped to redecorate the ballroom. However, he and wife spend less time there and elsewhere during their time off, since “owning their own store has meant curtailing some of their social life” (113). What a contrast to Frank Frech who – even though busy as assistant general manager at the town’s furniture plant –serves as president of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce, as director of the National Association of Furniture Manufacturers, and director of the National Association of Cost Accountants, while also belonging to the local chapter of the Elks lodge. Due to the ways in which these two men are depicted in the article, it must have appeared to the reader that Frank Frech, in contrast to Stan Wentland, is “an up-and-coming civil leader” (114).

This impression was underscored by the way in which Frech’s achievements in life are presented as showing “how the social ladder can be climbed” (114). This was achieved by providing a family history, which the article had not done for any of the other families. By establishing how Frech’s parents, who could supposedly “neither read or write”, arrived from Austria a generation ago, Frech’s level of education and his professional achievements were highlighted and were bound to impress the reader. It indicated the possibility of upward social mobility within U.S.-American society despite the fact that American society was not as classless as some would want it.

While the Frechs’ house was spacious, and while it was clearly located in a rather nice neighborhood, it lacked privacy. As indicated by the image, the house was similar in design to its neighboring house (defying the notion of “individually designed” homes discussed earlier in this chapter) and was located very closely to it. While not being located in an actual Levittown, the neighborhood can be compared to one. In 1958, Alexander F. Miller, director of the sociology department at Atlanta University, observed of Levittown, Pennsylvania: “A man not only is not isolated; he is virtually a partner to all the vicissitudes encountered by the family next door” (Miller 108). In contrast, a more expensive suburban development in Connecticut provided distance (and, thus, privacy) between its homes, with “enough space between neighbors to give a man a sense of splendid isolation. He may or may not know the man next door” (Miller 108). By applying the term “splendid isolation” to these homes, Miller drew a parallel to a crucial U.S.-American political approach. Derived from British foreign policy of “splendid isolation” in the late nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, the term was frequently applied to U.S.-American foreign policies. Proponents of American isolationism after World War I referred to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson who had – in their respective times - recommended that the U.S. remain isolated

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from Europe. In his First Inaugural Address in 1801, Jefferson referred to the U.S. and its inhabitants as being “kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradation of others; possessing a chosen country” (quoted in Wright, Louis 178). When applying this, as Miller did, to the expensive homes with distance between them, one might adapt Jefferson’s words to something along those lines: the homes find themselves to be “kindly separated by trees and a wide lawn from the troubles of one’s neighbors and sounds of the road”. In his article, Miller discussed a development in Connecticut, but in “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community”, *LIFE* featured a neighborhood comparable to it. Introducing the Holmstroms, a family it designated as lower upper class, the article provided an image of their home (Figure 3.4), which was removed from both neighbors and the road. The caption to the image provided by *LIFE* stated that the Holmstroms “never got acquainted” with their neighbors, underlining their “splendid isolation”.

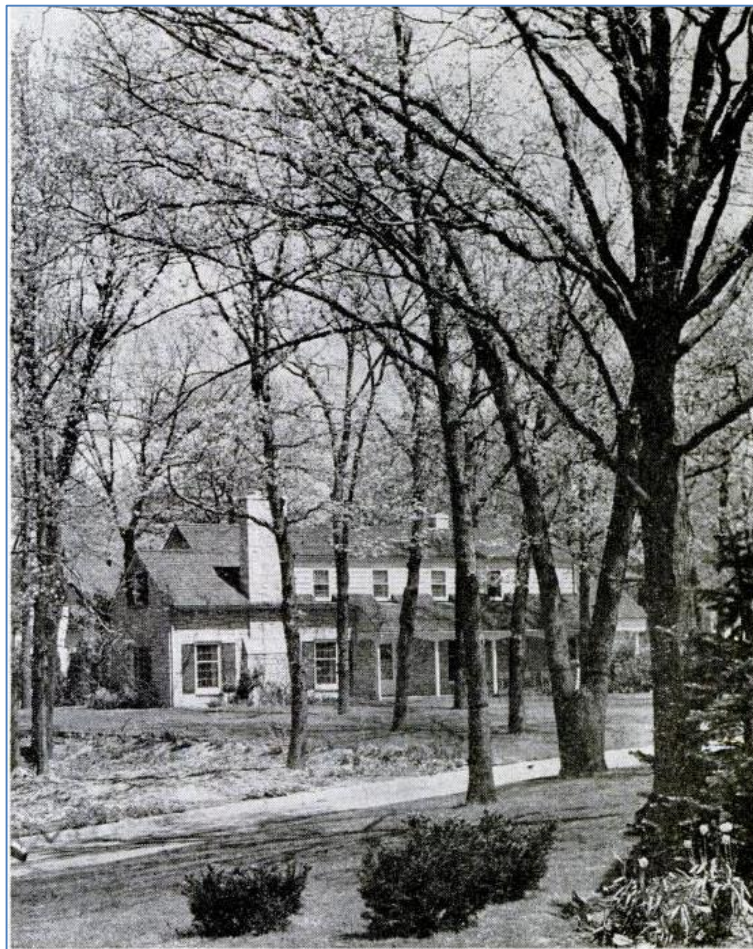


Figure 3.4: Comparable to the way in which the Pardees’ home was shown in chapter 1, the Holmstroms’ house was photographed from far enough away to underline its isolation and size.

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For the Holmstroms, too, the article provided a family history, as it did for the representatives of the upper upper class, the Forbes family. Between these three classes, the differences in lifestyle are illustrated most clearly in the ways they spend leisure time and interact with others. The Frechs have “never tried to join a country club”, while the Holmstroms resigned from their established country club to join one that “ranks higher socially”. However, the paragraph on the Holmstroms draws deliberate comparisons between John Holmstrom and Frank Frech, who is almost twenty years younger than Holmstrom: “In many respects his story is similar to that of Frank Frech”. Like the younger man, Holmstrom was a member of the Elks and was once president of the Chamber of Commerce. However, “there are several facts about Holmstrom’s present social position which put him across the border into Rockford’s upper class” (“A Sociologist Looks at an American Community” 114). In addition to the country club membership, this includes his type of house and neighborhood as well as the fact that his income is derived not only from salary but also from his profits as a stockholder in his company. By drawing comparisons between Frank Frech and John Holmstrom, the author implies that Frech, with a little application, might achieve the same class status within a couple of years, finding himself the owner of a home comparable to that of Holmstrom’s.

The upper upper class depicted in this article, symbolized by the Forbes family, differed from the Frechs and the Holmstroms in that Mrs. Forbes, the matriarch, was not the widow of a first generation well-to-do man. Instead, the article points out that her husband’s grandfather, himself a Scotch molder, founded the family business – the Gunité Foundries Corporation – in 1854 in Rockford. Without money in the family for multiple generations, upper upper class status seems out of reach for John Holmstrom and Frank Frech. However, it is implied that their sons and grandsons could someday find themselves to be members of this strata of society. In contrast to the paragraphs on the Frechs and the Holmstroms, the article makes no mention of any country club memberships for the Forbes family. Instead, the article pointed out that the Forbes family liked to entertain at home, utilizing their spacious rooms and the large terrace of the old building. Alongside this claim, an image showed the Forbes family coming together for a family barbecue (Figure 3.5).



Figure 3.5: The composition of the Forbes family picture is reminiscent of traditional Anglo-American family portraits from the 18th and 19th century.

The image of the Forbes family gathering contains various details which hint at the social status and wealth of the family. The terrace and the absence of a neighboring home close-by (only the river in the background) suggest a home in “splendid isolation”, well removed from neighbors and the road. The luxurious bar in the left hand corner indicates that entertaining is a frequent occurrence in this house. It is also noteworthy that three generations are present in this image - as well as an African American maid, which underlines the earlier observation that minorities were not present in *LIFE*'s depictions of the good life, unless as employees of the white, well-off homeowners.

The family is seated in a semi-circle, mostly separated by gender and age lines. The two men by the bar are engaged in conversation, with the seated relative in the right hand corner looking intently at them, supposedly following the conversation. None of the women – judging from their age, their wives – is participating in this scene. They sit removed from their husbands engaged in their own conversation, with their children seated and walking among them. This grouping of the women alongside the children, while their husbands enjoy alcoholic beverages – none of the women is seen holding a glass – clearly separates the grown men from their wives while drawing parallels between the women and children.

Interestingly, Mrs. Forbes, who has been depicted as the widowed matriarch of the family in the accompanying text, is not presented as presiding over the family gathering, as

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one might expect. Instead, she is shown slightly off-center, taking care of the food and presumably giving orders to the maid about dinner. Presiding over the family scene, shown above all other family members, and in the image’s center is a man the same age as Mrs. Forbes. The article’s authors do not introduce him. Since it is clear that he cannot be Mrs. Forbes’ husband, he may be her brother or brother-in-law. He is not participating in the domestic issues being discussed between Mrs. Forbes and her maid, but is instead overlooking – glass in hand – the family scene unfolding before him. The composition of this image is very much reminiscent of traditional Anglo-American family portraits from the 18th and 19th centuries. Above all, these portraits aimed at recording “the posture, material attributes, and ‘manner’ appropriate to broad class, age, and gender groups. They were at least in part intended and may usefully be read as documents of socially appropriate behavior and relationships if not of specific realities” (Lovell 244). Similarly, just as was the case with the traditional family portraits which were commissioned by rich families of merchants and civic leaders, the article does not provide a comparable image of any of the other families belonging to the lower and middle classes (the Wentland picture should not be read as a family portrait, but rather as an indicator of the cramped quarters the family had to deal with).

The results of Warner’s study must have touched a nerve. *LIFE* was neither the first nor the last publication to pick up on the study. As early as June, 1949, AP had run a story on Warner, which was published throughout the summer across all states by various local newspapers. In contrast to the story in *LIFE*, the main focus of the AP article was Warner’s assessment that the American class system was growing more rigid, with upward movement becoming increasingly difficult (“U.S. Social System Split in 6 Classes.”). Throughout the discussion of the *LIFE* article above, I repeatedly pointed out that the general tone, particularly the representation of Frank Frech’s development, suggested to the reader the continued possibility of social upward mobility. In the closing paragraphs of the article, *LIFE* formulated this explicitly. Briefly acknowledging Warner’s assessment that “channels through which an ambitious American can move are changing and may be drying up” (“A Sociologist Looks at an American Community” 119), the article finished on a positive note: “The saving grace of the American social system is that our social positions are not fixed artificially as they are in the so-called ‘classless’ society of Russia [...] Given the tools, the education, the will to do and a little luck, we can start at the bottom and climb to the top” (“A Sociologist Looks at an American Community” 119).

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Not only does this statement provide a positive closing note to the article, it also highlights the fact that discourses on homeownership and the American class system of the time are framed by the Cold War. As a matter of fact, five months before “A Sociologist...” was published, Henry Luce, along with a select other magazine editors, had joined the efforts of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). Running the Crusade for Freedom and Radio Free Europe, the OPC also asked for specific media coverage at home – coverage that would display, among other things, the squalid living conditions behind the Iron Curtain.⁴⁸ The reference to the artificially “classless” Soviet society may seem brief, but it is exemplary of similar short asides throughout *LIFE* articles of the time, which carry a clear message: that with the right tools, education and will, an individual in the United States can advance in social status in contrast to those living in the communist parts of the world. The overall gist is “mobility” versus “stasis”, and as upward mobility both depends on class differentiation and reaffirms it, this may well be the reason behind *LIFE*’s newly explicit approach to the U.S.-American class system.

The previously cited AP story “U.S. Social System Split in 6 Classes”, made specific mention of Warner’s findings that the lower-middle-class as well as the upper-lower-class were generally viewed as “good people, eager to get ahead” by the upper classes, while they were also looked down upon by those in the higher social strata.⁴⁹ *LIFE* played into the perception of the good, hard-working lower classes. In 1951, it featured a couple who owned a Baltimore row home. The couple and their neighbors were described as follows: “They are skilled workmen, machinists and minor officials, mostly high school graduates, who probably make an average of \$4,250 a year. They live quietly and respectably, going to bed early, and getting up early, almost always owning a car and a television set, not always a telephone” (“A Way of Life with Neighbors” 79). The reference to the “quiet” and “respectable” lifestyle of these homeowners accords with the perception of the “good people” of lower-middle class status. In addition, it brings to mind Benjamin Franklin’s suggestions from his essay “Way to Wealth”: “Early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise” (Franklin, “Way to Wealth” 2).

⁴⁸ For a good overview of the early days of the OPC, see Medhurst.

⁴⁹ In literature and film, in particular, these two classes are seldom granted the grandeur of the upper classes or the perceived honest work ethic of the true working class. One interesting article on this matter was penned in 2000 by Rita Felski from the University of Virginia in which she states: “The lower middle class has typically been an object of scorn among intellectuals, blamed for everything from exceedingly bad taste to the rise of Hitler [...] lower-middle-classness is not so much an identity as a non-identity: ‘The one class you do *not* belong to, and are not proud of at all, is the lower middle class. No one ever describes himself as belonging to the lower middle classes’” (Felski 34).

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Various aspects of the lives of the Baltimore couple and their neighbors would seem to place them into the lower middle class according to Warner’s system. While they were skilled at their profession, they were “mostly high school graduates” without a college education and consequently without a real opportunity to climb the social ladder. Unlike people such as the Frechs, these workmen were not expected to become wealthy. The article’s description of their possessions is also telling: most of them are unable to own a car, a television, and a telephone. Instead, they had to make a choice, with most of them forgoing the telephone in favor of car and TV. The article not only pointed to the homeowners’ virtues, but also to the homes’ virtues which were listed as “economy of space and cost; their great sin – a constricted monotony” (“A Way of Life with Neighbors” 79). By referring to this monotony as a “great sin” *LIFE* established a tainted image of neighborhoods where all homes looked the same. Homes such as these were not status symbols, but were rather symbols of quiet and respectable lives whose owners had to forego other objects such as telephones or television sets to afford them.

The article featured another development which was comparable to the Baltimore row homes (Figure 3.6). In this California neighborhood Van Nuys Garden Development (Figure 3.7), the homes were individually standing structures, but they did not afford more privacy or variety than the row homes. While the row homes had been praised in the article for their economy of space and cost, the homes within Van Nuys Garden Development supposedly offered another key advantage: their suburban location made it easy for their owners to get to beaches, or to go fishing or hunting without having to deal with Los Angeles traffic (“A Way of Life with Neighbors” 81). What a contrast to homes such as the “Wonder House” of the 1930s which was designed with the idea of entertaining friends at home in mind, and what a departure from the “good” homeowner of the 1940s who had been called on to spend his leisure time at home.

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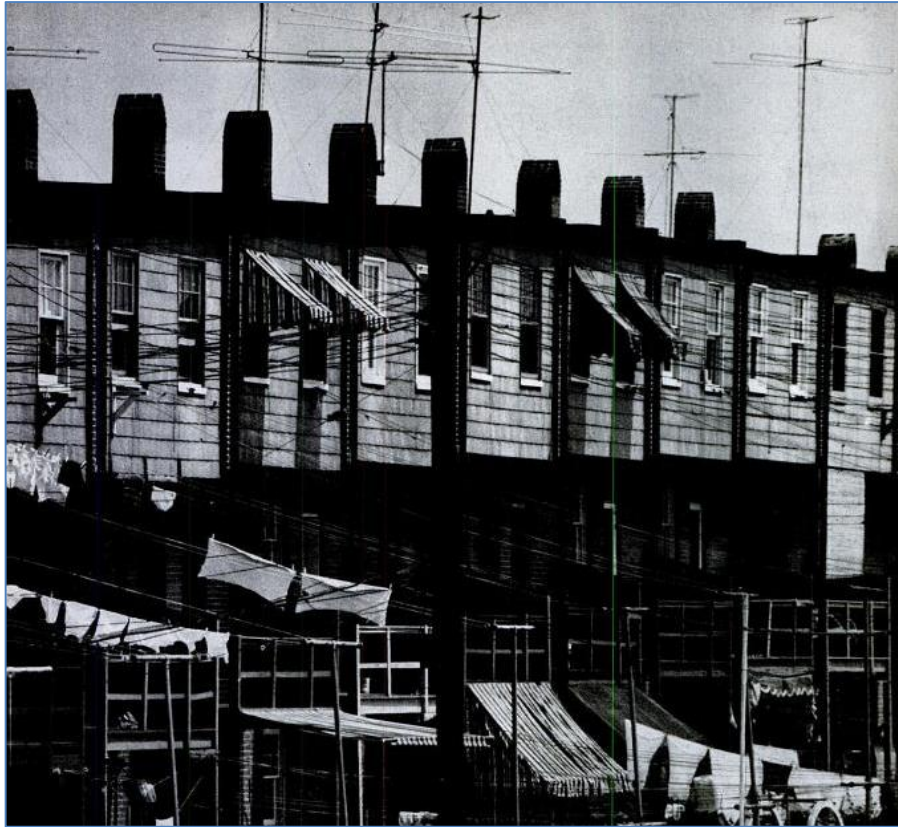


Figure 3.6: Generally, as mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, LIFE photographers took care to remove unwanted articles such as laundry from their images. Therefore, it must be assumed that the laundry was kept purposefully within this image to underscore the lack of modern appliances.



Figure 3.7: In choosing to show the Van Nuys Garden Development from above, LIFE emphasizes the sameness of these houses.

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To the reader it quickly becomes clear that homes such as those in the Van Nuys Garden Developments are not what *LIFE* wishes to portray as a desirable homeownership option. Rather, in its final paragraphs, discussing the Birger Zamore development in Warwick, New Jersey, the author introduces the way of living that supposedly “millions of American aspire to” (“A Way of Life with Neighbors” 84), and the home and neighborhood look very similar to that of the Frechs, who had been identified previously as “upper-middle-class”. Here, the homes and the lots they are located on lots that “are commodious, generously insulated by trees and, more important, by intelligent site selection and planning” (84). Furthermore, with architectural designs monitored, “there is no danger of eyesores springing up or of side-by-side duplications” (85). The people living here belong to the upper-middle-class, and they, too, can be grouped by income and occupation, at least according to the magazine: they are said to make \$5,000 to \$6,000 per year, which is almost twice the average family income of the time, and they are salesmen, engineers and “other minor executives”, who are lauded by *LIFE* for taking special care of their homes and yards, supposedly maintaining them “as though they were dukedoms, cherish[ing] each maple and pin oak as though it were a royal forest preserve. Their homes are their castles in a very real sense”. Also, unlike the inhabitants of the Van Nuys Garden Development, they “spend much time in their living room” (“A Way of Life with Neighbors” 85). In other words, their homes are comfortable enough that they do not yearn to spend time away from them.

The image illustrating this particular neighborhood (Figure 3.8) was taken at a much closer range than the one provided for the Van Nuys Garden development, which allows the viewer to notice the carefully trimmed lawns and cars – neither of which is displayed in the images illustrating Van Nuys homes or the row homes in Baltimore. Instead of the laundry found behind the Baltimore row homes, there are flower boxes protruding from the windows, underscoring the considerable difference in lifestyle between these classes. Also, the bird’s-eye perspective chosen to illustrate the Van Nuys Gardens development gives an impression of shutting the viewer out. The majority of the image is taken up by the roofs which appear, shield-like, to bar the neighborhood from view. The image of the upper-middle-class option is taken from such an angle that the viewer gets the impression of walking along the road, looking at the surroundings. It is much more inviting and accessible than the other images provided in this article. Consequently, it does not take an attentive reader to understand the article’s message: homeownership is a good thing to aspire to, but the “real deal” is to be had only at a price.

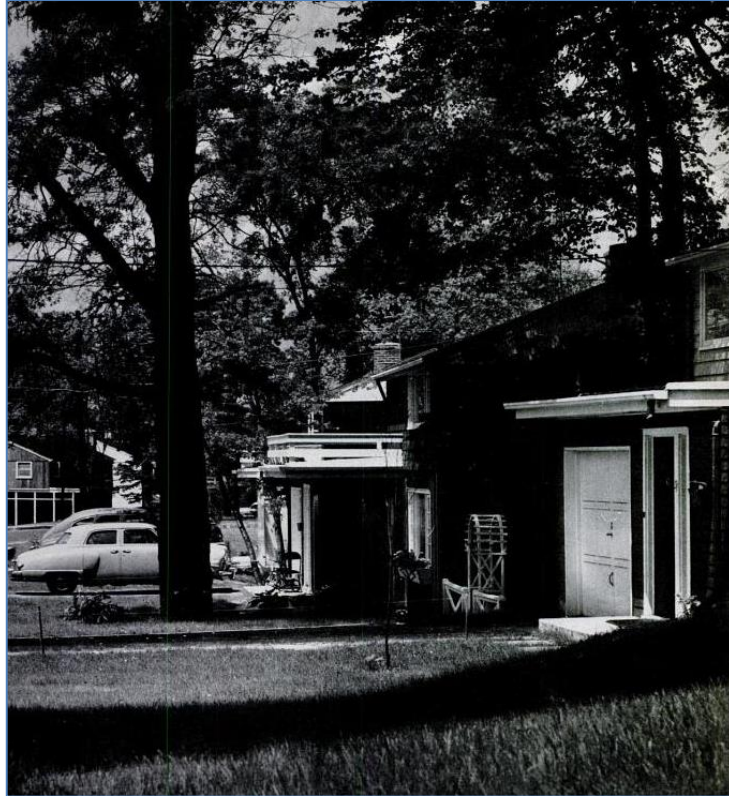


Figure 3.8: The picture provided for an example of upper-middle class living could hardly stand in starker contrast to the upper-lower and lower-middle class neighborhoods featured in the same article.

“More Livable Homes”

By the 1950s, *LIFE* had been celebrating the comforts of modern homes equipped with work-saving appliances for more than a decade. Size had been of much lesser concern to the magazine’s authors. In the quest to have homes be affordable to more people than ever before and to address the housing shortage immediately following World War II, affordable housing had been stripped down to its bare necessities: kitchen, living room and bedrooms; “Gone were the formal dining room, the sun porch and den, the pantry and guest room of the nineteenth-century suburban villa” (Kelly 26).⁵⁰ In the early 1950s, *LIFE* started to call for more spacious homes that allowed room to entertain guests (and not just the couple from next door). More importantly, they were to allow room for the whole family to gather comfortably, and not be as cramped as the Wentlands in their living room. As mentioned earlier, *LIFE* had suggested to its readers that owning a comfortable home was also about providing means to keep one’s family together in times of rising divorce rates. It continued this rhetoric in a piece entitled “Kitchens for the family” in 1952.

⁵⁰ And yet, the size of homes played a part in Cold War rhetoric dealing with American homeownership: one article gleefully pointed out how the “average modern home contains 972 square feet of livable space in contrast to the average behind the ‘iron curtain’ where a family of four is confined to 352 square feet” (“Lynwood Loan Group Sees 109% Hike in Savings.”).

In the very beginning of the article, the author made clear that this was a story on the lifestyle of the well-off, by referring to the dwindling of household servants as well as amenities such as guest bedrooms, which were featured in middle-class homes before the war, or in upper class homes after it: “The dwindling of domestic help has yearly sent more and more householders into their own kitchens. Like hosts who slept in their guest room and find that the bed sags and the reading lamp has a 15-watt bulb, they were surprised by what they found”(88). According to the 1950 census, the number of such servants had declined by 30% compared to 1940 (88). There had already been a considerable decline in the number of servants between 1930 and 1940. Chapter 1 examined this phenomenon and discussed the servant-rhetoric of newly emerging electrical appliances in the household. But by the early 1950s, this discourse had weakened considerably, and the article on “Kitchens for the Family” paid only fleeting attention to appliances. It rather emphasized the inherent possibilities presented by a spacious home to adapt it to one’s needs and lifestyle.

The kitchens introduced in this article were large and based on open floor plans, thus serving as places for the whole family to gather and spend time together. One particularly good example for this was the kitchen of the Austin family: “Instead of a large table in the kitchen, there is a large sturdy pine bench before the fireplace where the family likes to gather in the evening for barbecues, group game sessions or simply for sociable warming of fingers and toes” (94). The image chosen to depict this kitchen to the reader, however, did not show the whole family gathered on the bench (Figure 3.9). Rather, it was carefully composed: the men of the household (father and son) sit in the foreground, savoring pursuits of the mind (reading), while the women are all not only in the background, but also shown from behind, from the side, or with a partially concealed face while doing household chores. Judging from this image, the modern and spacious kitchens – and, by extension, well-designed homes – not only held together the family unit, but also underscored established gender roles.

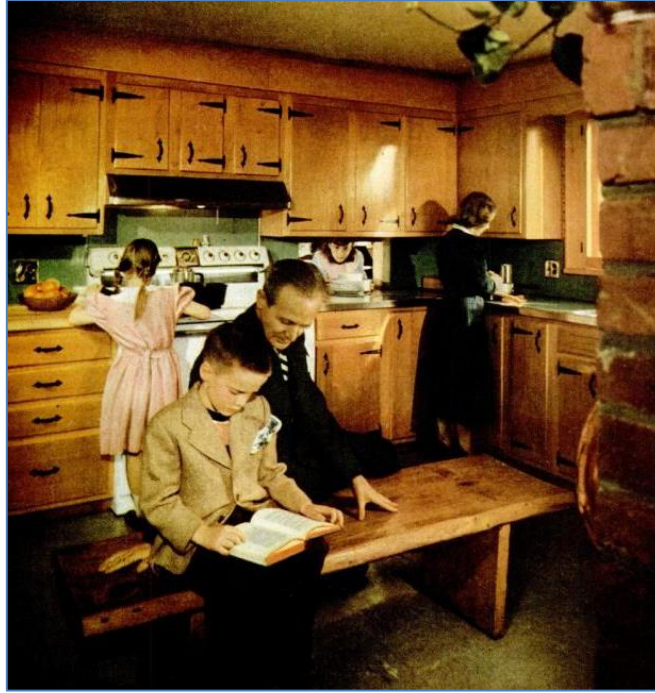


Figure 3.9: While the men in this picture savor pursuits of the mind (reading), all of the women are shown as doing housework.

In 1958, *LIFE* once more praised homes that were designed to fit respective owners' individual needs, and that amounted to a departure from the standardized small homes that were mass-produced in new suburban developments. It did so in a four-part series run in September and October of 1958 entitled “More Livable Homes”. In the first part to this series, *LIFE* announced “the average American does not consider his home a man’s castle – or a woman’s either” (“More Livable Homes Part I” 62). This was blamed on poor planning in modern homes. Space, according to the article, was too limited and used inefficiently, and families failed to appreciate the comfort afforded by more space and additional rooms:

Families [...] spend more time and thought buying a car than a house. Only after a woman has decided that she likes the blue kitchen cabinets and her husband likes the heating plant and they have made a down payment and moved in do they begin to realize that a fourth bedroom might have been worth the extra money, that a larger living room might have made a big difference in the fun of entertaining their friends, that they should have surveyed the neighborhood beforehand, found out about schools, playgrounds, shopping facilities. (“More Livable Homes Part I” 63)

This complaint that families are not being aware of what they should be looking for in a home, is indicative of the role *LIFE* was striving to play during that time: readers might

perceive the magazine to be a guide or manual for how to buy a home. In including such a focus among its other features, *LIFE* may have been attempting to tap into the successful market of home service magazines, which were boasting higher readership numbers than ever before. The combined circulation of the middle class home service magazines *American Home* and *Better Homes and Gardens* increased by approximately 59 per cent between 1946 and 1955. Circulation of the more upscale magazines *House Beautiful* and *House & Garden* even grew by 139 per cent in the same time frame. Advertising revenue of all four of these magazines combined was more than two and a half times as much in 1955 than what it had been in 1946 (Roland 348). The function of home service magazine articles has been identified as follows: “Can a reader learn to do something as a result of reading it? This was the formula on which *Better Homes and Gardens* was founded” (Roland 349). The series “More Livable Homes” by *LIFE* certainly followed this formula, allowing a reader to learn how to buy a home that one would be happy with for years to come, and how to decorate and use that home to utilize it to its fullest potential.

The amount of living space available continued to play an important role in *LIFE*’s discussion of the modern home. *LIFE* suggested that more bedrooms and larger living rooms were to serve the cultivation of oneself. In an essay accompanying the first installment of “More Livable Homes”, John Burchard, dean of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, informed the reader that “individuality can be cultivated only if the house is spacious and imaginative in plan and if at the same time there are areas where the individual can be private” (“More Livable Homes Part I” 67). According to Burchard (and *LIFE*), individuality is a purchasable good.

The second part of the series, published a week later, featured an essay written by architect Edward D. Stone, who bemoaned the fact that “since the average homeowner’s Mount Vernon has now shrunk to a one-story box and his estate dwindled to a minimum lot, the advantages of the isolated dwelling on its piece of land are entirely lost” (“More Livable Homes Part II” 81). This comparison of one’s home to Mount Vernon, George Washington’s country estate, deserves extra attention. Renovating and reconstructing his home to befit his needs (and rank) was a project dear to Washington who spent his lifetime working on the home – incidentally, among other things, rebuilding it twice, each time doubling it in size. But the comparison to Mount Vernon may not only refer to the need for a larger home. When Mount Vernon was appropriated and renovated by Washington in the middle of the eighteenth century, one’s home had begun to serve as an indicator of one’s position in society: “The

imposing brick ‘palace’ built [...] to house the colony’s royal governor in Williamsburg had begun the trend, and an emerging elite of wealthy planters eager to solidify their positions had carried it on with vigor” (Dalzell 563). Furthermore, Washington himself repeatedly referred to Mount Vernon as his “vine” and “fig tree”, which is an image with biblical origins. In “Micah”, everybody is “‘sitting under his vine and under his fig tree’ with the added blessing that ‘no one shall make them afraid’”. When applying this, the vine and fig tree image connotes “peace, home, general well being, and freedom from fear” (Dalzell 571). Furthermore, Mount Vernon, Monticello, and other homes constructed during the mid-eighteenth-century, followed the style of English Palladianism: English builders of the eighteenth century based their designs on ideas of the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. In his *Four Books of Architecture*, Palladio had included a “lyrical celebration of the joys of rural life” (Dalzell 558), suggesting that a gentleman’s country seat should serve as a place of restoration and comfort through farming, recreation, and “studies of letters and contemplation” (Dalzell 559). It would make sense that Stone had these aspects in mind when bemoaning the fact that the “minimum lots” modern homes were placed on caused “the advantages of the isolated dwelling on its piece of land” to be lost. No farming (or at least extensive gardening) could be cultivated on these lots. In small and boxlike homes like the ones depicted in Figure 3.7, there was neither enough room nor comfort to spend time inside for the study of letters and contemplation, or anything comparable. Instead, those tiny homes caused people to spend increasing amounts of their time outside of them, rather than enjoy possibilities of recreation in their homes.

In the third part of its “More Livable Homes” series, *LIFE* introduced homes that could serve as their owners’ vine and fig tree: they were spacious, well-composed and had been specifically designed for the families living in them to meet their individual needs exactly. The houses ranged in cost from \$25,000 to \$150,000, technically making them attainable for the upper classes, but hardly for the average American family which could not afford a home costing more than \$8,750. But the message of the article was clear: even if one could not afford such a house, one should take inspiration from it, as such individually designed homes “suit their [owners’] habits, whims, personal tastes and add greatly to their happiness” (“More Livable Homes Part III” 54). In beautifully arranged and colored images, *LIFE* presented an enviable lifestyle to be enjoyed in homes such as these (Figures 3.10 – 3.11).

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All of the houses discussed in the article, including the two depicted in Figures 3.10 and 3.11, have one thing in common: their suitability for use as a gathering space for family, friends, and neighbors. The depictions in Figures 3.10 and 3.11 were possibly carefully chosen to put such houses into stark contrast to the homes which were used by their owners only to eat and sleep in. These expensively designed homes were depicted as places in which families loved to spend time and into which they invited extended family and friends to “entertain”. In selecting such images, *LIFE* not only encouraged consumerism, but also incorporated lifestyle advertisements: if one wanted to be perceived as belonging to a certain class, there were certain activities to engage in. “Entertaining” at home was one of them and it carried the implicit advantage of allowing one to show off one’s property, wealth and class status.



Figure 3.10: The “way of living” attached to homeownership – according to *LIFE* – featured entertaining at home.



Figure 3.11: The golden glow coming in through the windows makes the family idyll depicted appear similar to paintings of the holy family.

The two images inserted above (Figures 3.10-3.11) were taken in two different homes of the six introduced in total. Even without seeing the full home in each picture, it becomes clear to the viewer that these are modern and spacious homes. The “modern” aspect is particularly underscored by the window arrangements in Figures 3.10 and 3.11. Standardized or prefabricated homes do not feature windows as large as those in 3.10. Furthermore, these windows allow the viewer to notice that – although located in a suburb – the home is far enough removed from neighbors to make it seem as if one were in the countryside. These homes were celebrated not only for their spaciousness, but also for including various living areas and levels so that adults and children could spend time apart, or that a party being held in one part of the house would not interfere with activities in other parts of the house.

While there was no comparable window front in Figure 3.11, the high windows just below the roof allowed for fascinating light effects, which were emphasized by the soft coloring of the image. The golden glow coming in through those windows made the family idyll depicted appear similar to paintings of the holy family or biblical miracles, which are touched by rays of light from above. There is the part of a piano visible in the left hand corner of the image, which makes an interesting addition to the record lying on the floor. The piano could certainly have been excluded from the scene, but the photographer and editors chose to

include it. The presence of such an expensive musical instrument clearly underscores the social position of this family. According to Bourdieu: “When the child grows up in a household in which music is not only listened to [...] but also performed [...], and a fortiori when the child is introduced at an early age to a ‘noble’ instrument – especially the piano – the effect is at least to produce a more familiar relationship to music [...] testifying to their wealth and good taste” (Bourdieu 67-8). Similarly, by framing the image so that the piano is included, *LIFE* staged and emphasized the supposed wealth and good taste of the family as a whole.

Housing Alternatives for “The Common Man”

Just how prominently “modern homes” were featured in various magazines and sources of the times becomes apparent when looking at an article in *Harper’s Magazine*, that was published in 1951. It, too, featured modern homes, but it took a sarcastic look at the most recent fads and fashions in home design – such as, for example, the “Social Struggle House” (Figure 3.12), in which the inside was “one big room in which children and parents madden each other” (Blake & Osborn 52). One cannot help but think of *LIFE*’s celebration of large kitchens which combine living, cooking, and dining aspects of the family in one large room, and the celebration of open floor plans in general. Considering that *LIFE*, for example, celebrated such open floor plans for family unity, the depiction of physical fighting in such a home clearly takes the opposite view. Although rather crude in execution, the drawings did pick up on various associations linked with modern homes at the time: there was a large window front on the right side, exposed ceiling beams and modern lighting options, and yet, one thing was far from modern; it was the woman who was swinging the frying pan in her hand, hinting at firmly established traditional gender roles.

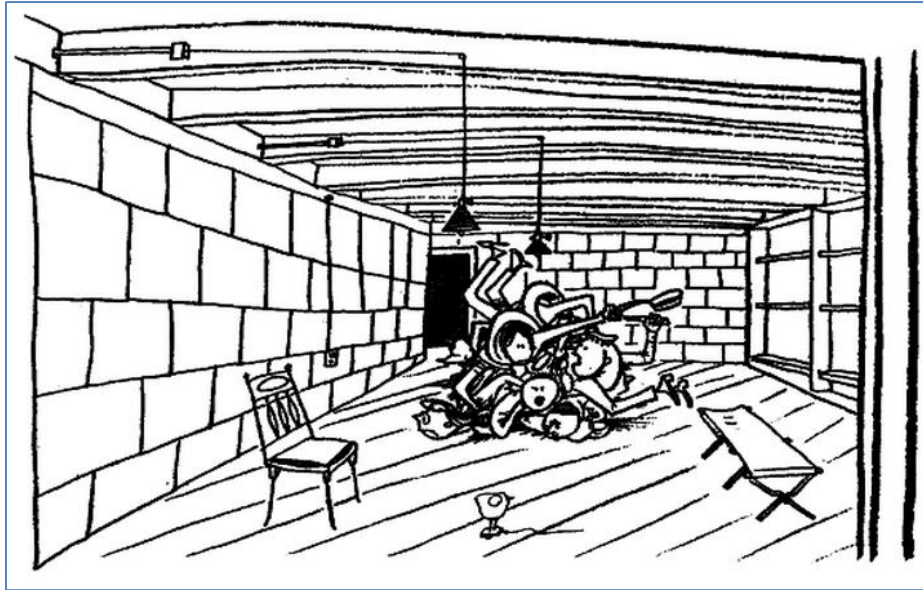


Figure 3.12 – The “Social Struggle House” provides a sarcastic assessment of the modern open floor plans, suggesting that – with no space to be on one’s own – struggles among the inhabitants are a logical consequence.

In contrast to the open floor plan of the “Social Struggle House”, the article also took a look at the “Decentralized House” which featured a sprawling floor plan and was sarcastically considered by the article to be a “blessing in today’s disintegrating family life. A skillful architect can design such a house so that no one member of a given family need ever cross paths with one another” (Solinger 53). The accompanying picture (Figure 3.13) showed a home that was more reminiscent of an old Roman villa, or the sprawling rural homes of Southern plantation owners – there may be no stables or servants’ quarters here, but there would certainly be enough room for them.



Figure 3.13 – The “Decentralized House” – once more a sarcastic twist, depicting a house so decentralized that it is reminiscent of an old Roman villa.

In a stark contrast, the article introduced “The Modest House”. No text beyond the caption was dedicated to this house; it was depicted by a drawing only, which stands in stark contrast to the depictions of the other homes (Figure 3.14). According to the caption, “The common man lives in the modest house”. And who was the common man? I have quoted this

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term before in this chapter – *LIFE* used it to refer to Stan Wentland, the owner of a grocery store who inhabited a small apartment above the store with his family. Figure 3.3 had provided a look into his living room, which was cramped and could hardly contain the family – let alone guests – in the evening. The image in *Harper’s Magazine* provides a very similar impression: a cramped, boxlike structure, which allows no room for privacy.

Possibly as a way to enable the “Common Man” to improve the home he already owned, in the late 1940s the FHA began to offer loans for home improvement projects, and according to one source of the time, “Practically every home improvement or repair can be financed by these loans” (“Financing is Simple for Improvements”). The measures soon yielded effects. By July 1951, the Construction Research Bureau announced that “American homeowners have become acutely aware of the need for remodeling” and lauded an increase in remodeling activity of 46% between January 1950 and January 1951 (“Plan Program Of Remodeling For Your Home”).

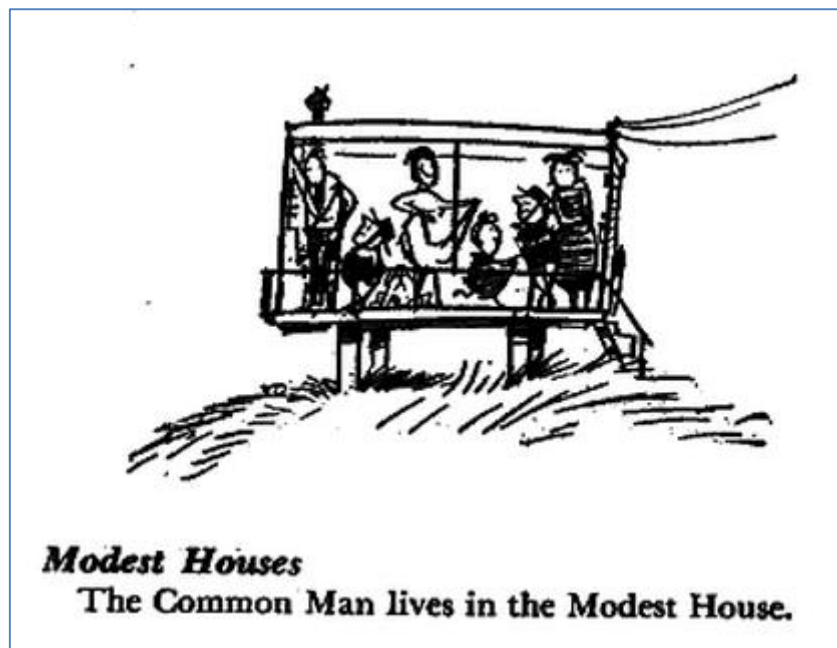


Figure 3.14 – The “Modest House” of the Common Man – the point made with these drawings stands in direct opposition to *LIFE*’s homeownership representations: the average family lives in a box; the spacious and individualized homes celebrated by *LIFE* are not attainable by them.

The trend continued and sprouted into a blossoming “Do-It-Yourself-Movement”, which was referred to as “one of the greatest business and social phenomena of the post war years” (“Do-It-Yourself-Builders Spend Over \$3 Billion Annually”). While 90% of all the paint sold in 1942 was purchased by professional painters, by 1953, 75% of paint sales went to amateurs who wished to beautify their homes. By the beginning of 1955, it was expected that homeowners would spend \$10,000,000,000 for home maintenance, with \$1,500,000,000 spent

for paint alone in that year (“\$10 Billion Home Repairs”). Contemporaries attributed this growing trend to more leisure time but also to new materials, such as plywood, which were easy to use for non-professionals. In 1952, lumber dealers sold 300 million square feet of this plywood to homeowners who supposedly used it for “everything from a new subfloor in the kitchen or a newly paneled attic to a fence in the back yard or a lightweight car-top skiff” (“\$10 Billion Home Repairs”).

Increasingly, homeowners were shown how to partake in the movement; a 1953 Do-It-Yourself Show in Chicago attracted 100,000 visitors eager to learn how to hang wallpaper, use a paint spray gun, or use power tools (Bareuther). This trend is particularly significant because the United States was at war again at that time – in Korea. However, much unlike the case a few years previously when World War II caused a severe curtailment of building materials, shortages of building materials were hardly discussed in the early 1950s – possibly because other materials were available to fill the gaps.⁵¹

At an international fair in Sweden in 1956, Do-It-Yourself was the theme of the American pavilion: “Virtually every power tool that has advanced the American basement workshop was on display” (Belair, 1956). The American Chamber of Commerce declared 1956 to be “the year to fix”, and cooperated with banks, national consumer and housing companies as well as supply companies of building materials to “encourage homeowners to repair or remodel” (“Bank Joins Home Repairs Project”).

The Do-It-Yourself-Movement as well as individual additions done to houses by respective homeowners became a means to individualize even the “Modest House” which had been erected in uniform housing developments. In one article in 1956, the *New York Times* explained “How owners overcome uniformity in suburban housing colonies” (Stern). According to the article, homeowners individualized these mass produced homes because they took pride in their property on the one hand, but also because of the need for expansions as families grew on the other hand. As one example, the piece cites Levittown, one of the most well-known uniformly mass-produced developments. This community, according to the

⁵¹ Despite this war, and even though *LIFE* suggested that the prices of homes were still rising, some sources suggest that Americans at that time were spending lower percentages of their income on homes than ever before, simply because the rise in wages outstripped the rise in costs of new homes. In 1909, Americans had spent 19% of their total income for housing; in 1949, Americans spent only 9.5% for basic housing – and: “Even by adding the costs of household equipment, gadgets, and operating expenses to the 1949 figure, the earlier percentage cannot be equaled. In 1949, we Americans spent more for highly advertised artificial stimulants and escape – tobacco, alcoholic beverages, and amusements – than we did for the primary necessity of shelter, new housing and rents combined” (Hodgell: 95).

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author, “is now well on its way to becoming architecturally diversified”. The article ends by prophesying: “The end product will be a blend of the economic advantages of mass production and the expression of individual taste and pride in property, the trademark of American homeownership” (Stern).

In many cases, however, it may not have been pride in ownership that drove alterations to the mass-produced home, but rather the need for more space as families grew with increasing birth rates, and the presentation of home improvements in the media (promoted by certain industries). Articles tended to place less emphasis on individualization as a reason for home improvement and more on inexpensive ways of increasing a home’s size. Various experts quoted in newspapers in the late 1950s talked about a trend towards larger homes (“Million New Homes Expected”). In general, homes were expected to have three bedrooms as opposed to two bedrooms, as well as a two-car garage, “in line with the trend toward a larger and two-car family” (“House Buyer Has Wide Pick”). Three bedroom homes also began to require two bathrooms as “appraisers are rating houses as obsolete when they have three bedrooms and only one bathroom” (“Bldg. mar26 – 2 Bathrooms Gain Favor in Bigger Homes”). The *New York Times* quoted an architect who talked of the need to “[conform] residential structures to their individual sites in such a way that they will provide a maximum of indoor and outdoor living space” and thus provide the average family with the room it requires (“Economical Study of Small Home Design Urged to Offset the Rising Cost of Land”).

Concluding Remarks

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, the U.S. economy recovered quickly from the brief recession in the early 1950s. And yet, a sense of insecurity permeated American society throughout the decade. Communism was projected and perceived as an overwhelming external threat. This explains much of the criticism of Warner’s views about the American class system, and accounts for the decision to omit from their publication his conclusion that class lines were becoming more rigid, for fear of serving Soviet propaganda. The mobility of the American class system was projected in opposition to the stasis of the Soviet system. Accordingly, an elaborate discussion of the American class system, which concluded that class lines were becoming more rigid, was seen as ill-timed. This is illustrated in “Class Struggle in America”, a commentary published in an Illinois newspaper in 1949: “It could be [that it] will make good Communist propaganda. Too bad that Warner [...] can’t do a similar study behind the iron curtain” (“Class Struggle in America”). Possibly so as not to play into

any communist propaganda, most papers continued to refer to the middle class as a whole, portraying it as “mammoth” in comparison to the lower and upper class (“The Economic Leveling”). Warner’s multi-tiered class definition process did not find its way into mainstream media (as I will show in the following chapters, it did not even remain dominant in *LIFE*’s approach to middle class representations). Middle class status was generally determined by ownership, not the kind of home one owned or the neighborhood it was in, or how one made their money: the middle class was defined as consisting “of those who own something of significant value but still have to work for a living” while the upper class lived off its accumulated wealth and lower class owned nothing “of value” (“Middle Class America”). This “something of significant value” was generally a house as well as a car (increasingly two cars, as a matter of fact), and most sources of the time agreed that “It is the middle class, the worker-owner, which IS America and which has made America great” (“Middle Class America”). The considerable homeownership rate, according to 1950s’ papers, made the American middle class “unique in the world”, and the material well-being served as “a mightier bulwark than the atom bomb in turning back Communism” (“Little Business Points the Way”). By being homeowners, according to the general rhetoric, Americans shared in the country’s growing prosperity – unlike the people of Russia: “how about Russia?” asked one opinion piece, “How many Russians own their own homes? How many Russians share the prosperity of whatever modern features there are to Soviet civilization?” (Brunner). I find that, as the Cold War was heating up, *LIFE* presented homeownership as the great leveler among Americans, suggesting that the “good life” of a homeowner was attainable for the majority of American citizens while implying that this was not the case behind the Iron Curtain.

American society had been shaken during World War II, which particularly caused a sense of destabilization within American families – rising divorce rates and the subsequent voiced fear that women were becoming increasingly manly (and threatening to an established societal order) attest to that. At the same time, with higher education and higher standards of living attainable to more Americans than ever before, people had a wider array of life choices to choose from than previously. It may therefore come as little surprise that Americans in the 1950s increasingly turned to self-help literature which was to serve as a guiding light in settling on which choices to make (Thomson).

A 1992 analysis of bestselling self-help literature from the 1950s identified the following statement as a central motif in the literature (and American society at the time): “The key to

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success and happiness lies in assuming self-control, establishing goals for the self, and striving to become a socially cooperative and ‘mature’ individual” (Thomson 501). *LIFE*’s representations of homeownership from that time period were very closely aligned with this self-help rhetoric, and it may have been the case that *LIFE*’s editors were aiming for this – to guide its readership through this challenging time period. In a way, homeownership (the “good” kind, as suggested by *LIFE*), was portrayed as the master key to success and happiness, which kept women in their place and communism in America at bay. It covered all four aspects called for by the era’s self-help literature: self-control, goals, social cooperation and maturity. Homeownership and (self-) control had been linked for centuries in the United States, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation (Tocqueville had already written about this perceived connection).

In the discussion of *LIFE*’s 1949 piece “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community”, in which the magazine introduced Professor Warner’s class theories, I explained how homeownership and class status were linked. For instance, *LIFE* celebrated Frank Frech for his rise into the upper middle class, referring to him as a shining example of “how the social ladder can be climbed”, while omitting the fact that Warner’s research had concluded that the American class structure was becoming increasingly rigid, with upwards mobility severely limited. By omitting this, and by lauding Frech’s rise in society, *LIFE* suggested a goal to aspire to: upper middle class status with the house to show it. This kind of rhetoric continued throughout the 1950s. In 1951, it was done explicitly: in the piece “A Way of Life with Neighbors”, *LIFE* identified a suburban, upper middle class development as “the way of life millions of Americans aspire to”. By contrasting it with bleak images of row homes in Baltimore and a standardized housing development in California, it underlined the desirability of “making it” into one of the neighborhoods where not all homes looked alike and flowerpots instead of laundry greeted the home-comer. Frech’s civic engagement, which was mentioned repeatedly in the article, caters to the goal of being a responsible individual.

Finally, homeownership indicated maturity. According to *Webster*, maturity may refer not only to “having or showing the mental and emotional qualities of an adult” but also to “having reached a final or desired state”. In one’s way up the social ladder, the first home one owned could well be not one’s last, but owning a “good” home, as defined by *LIFE*, certainly marked reaching a “desired state”.

Chapter 4: “[To] live together in peace – possibly even friendship “ – Segregation among Homeowners (1959-1965)

The previous chapter discussed the emergence of an increased focus on class status within American society throughout the 1950s. This led to a growing focus on the characteristics of one’s home. However, it was not only the individual home that signified one’s spending power and social position. It was also the homes – as well as the people owning them – in one’s neighborhood that established one’s position in the social strata.

This sentiment made its way into the cultural discourses of the time: The 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates illustrates this very well. Take, for example, the scene in which Frank and April Wheeler – both white and college-educated - visit their future house along with their real estate agent. Driving up towards their street, the real estate agent points out how the area “isn’t very desirable at this end, as you can see Crawford Road is mostly these little cinderblocky, pickup-trucky places. Plumbers, carpenters, little local people of that sort” (Yates 29). She then proceeds to tell them that their future home stands quite apart from these “little” people, located on Revolutionary Road which is “much nicer” and that their prospective neighbors are, after all, college educated professionals (Yates 29).

People’s professions were not the only factors that determined the prestige of the neighborhood where a house was located. Race – and racism – began to play a much more explicit part in discourses surrounding suburban homeownership. This may well have been caused by the Civil Rights Movement which called for the desegregation of neighborhoods. Throughout the previous chapters I discussed how African Americans were simply absent from *LIFE*’s articles on homeownership. Maids formed the only exception to this rule. This changed slightly in the early 1960s as *LIFE* published an excerpt of the novel *Peacable Lane* by Keith Wheeler. The book told the story of a black family that wants to buy a home in an all-white neighborhood and the ways in which their new neighbors react. Not only did it raise questions of racial prejudice and hatred, it also touched upon blockbusting which – as will be illustrated in this chapter- was widely discussed throughout U.S. media at the time.⁵²

Discussions about racial prejudices among suburban homeowners were widespread throughout the 1960s. In 1962, *Students for a Democratic Society* published the Port Huron Statement, which summarized what the organization believed to be wrong within American society. In addition to harsh criticism of the fact that Americans focused more on their

⁵² The *New York Times* has defined blockbusting as “the use of the race issue to frighten white families into selling their homes to speculators, sometimes at a loss” (Arnold).

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“social” rather than their “intellectual” status, the statement also included a long paragraph dealing with the continuous absence of African Americans in white suburbs (unless they were there as maids or gardeners):

While cultures generally interpenetrate, white America is ignorant still of nonwhite America – and perhaps glad of it. The white lives almost completely within his immediate, close-up world where things are tolerable, there are no Negroes except on the bus corner going to and from work, and where it is important that daughter marry right. White, like might, makes right in America today. Not knowing the ‘nonwhite’ however, the white knows something less than himself. Not comfortable around ‘different people’, he reclines in whiteness instead of preparing for diversity. Refusing to yield objective social freedoms to the ‘nonwhite’, the white loses his personal subjective freedom by turning away ‘from all these damn causes’.

(Students for a Democratic Society)

While some legislation had been passed to address segregation in housing, it usually pertained to public housing and did not extend to the suburbs. By the middle of the 1960s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized civil rights marches through all-white neighborhoods across the country, calling for “open housing”. Many of these marches ignited hostilities between white residents and black protestors. The overall white American population was divided on whether or not to open their suburbs to African Americans, and some founded Fair Housing Committees to address racism in real estate.

These citizens who undertook to break through the barriers embedded in real estate practices did so because they believed [...] that a truly democratic community must be a heterogeneous community, that isolation at the community level is no less dangerous than isolation at the international level [...] They wanted their children to be exposed to people of diverse ethnic backgrounds so as to learn to be at ease among them and to accept people on individual merit. (McGraw 16)

As a matter of fact, this new sense of pride in ethnic diversity did not apply only to African Americans. Other “white ethnics” – Americans with Irish, German, or Polish roots – reaffirmed their national heritage. Non-Christian and Non-Protestant holidays such as Chanukah or St. Patrick’s Day were celebrated more openly and by more people than before.

In 1968, the Bilingual Education Act was passed, providing funding to school districts for programs including bilingual education programs, to help students with limited English speaking abilities. *LIFE* continued to neglect race and ethnicity issues in matters of homeownership. Instead, it focused on other kinds of segregation: education and occupation, as mentioned above, as well as age. The retired homeowner emerged as a new subject in *LIFE*'s homeownership discourse. This was probably caused by the steady rise of the number of elderly citizens throughout the early 1960s. Politics, too, focused increasingly on topics surrounding the elderly. In 1961, a White House Conference on Aging attempted to identify challenges surrounding this trend. The upper middle classes approaching retirement age could afford good homes, and the retirement community, providing the opportunity of homeownership among people one's own age, was repeatedly praised by *LIFE*, addressing its aging, well-off readership.

In the early 1960s, *LIFE*'s reach was at its zenith: the overall percentage of Americans buying magazines peaked in 1960, and a Politz Research Survey found *LIFE* to be read by 24.8% of Americans – second only to *Reader's Digest* (Baughman 44-45). The early 1960s were particularly well-suited for a magazine as consumerist- (and advertisement-) driven as *LIFE*:

In the common cultural coinage of the 1960s everybody wanted more [...] More experiences, more styles, more sounds, more ideas – an ethos of more fairly courses its way through *Life*'s pages in the 1960s. Teeming with images of abundance, *Life* itself was an image of abundance, an icon of American plenty. (Gennari 269)

Consequently, *LIFE*'s representations of homeownership throughout the 1960s focused on consumerism more than ever before and this catering to excessive consumerism explains the continued absence of race issues from its homeownership representations. The following discussion of segregation among homeowners within *LIFE* addresses two questions in particular: Which narratives did *LIFE* employ in its representation of segregation among homeowners? Which conclusions can be drawn from the ways in which segregation was featured in *LIFE*?

Elderly Homeowners

Large portions of the white and college-educated middle class which had begun reading *LIFE* in the late 1930s were reaching retirement age in the late 1950s, which explains why *LIFE* editors seem to have taken a particular interest in featuring stories on retirement communities which frequently provided homeownership opportunities to the elderly. In so doing, *LIFE* tapped into a small particular real estate boom, because retirement communities proved to be an attractive investment to residential construction companies. Florida was an especially targeted location for these construction projects, and in the late 1950s and into the early 1960s the state was experiencing both a large population increase and a considerable surge in land prices. Between 1950 and 1959, the state’s population grew by 1.4 million people and in 1959, 3,000 new people moved to Florida per week (“Florida is Center of a Land Boom”). In 1959, it was said that, to a large extent, young families were lured to the state by its “still-expanding industry which, while its growth has slowed, still is creating jobs by the thousands” (“Florida is Center of a Land Boom”). Yet, while a large part of new Floridians may have been young families, particular attention was paid to the state as a desirable place in which to retire and the article quoted a developer as saying “We are interested in people who are retired, about to retire, and who are looking forward to retirement” (“Florida is Center of a Landboom”).⁵³ The elderly, in general, played an increasingly prominent role in the public discourse, and the retired homeowner was featured prominently within the pages of *LIFE*. The reason behind this general interest in issues surrounding the elderly was an increase in the number of elderly citizens throughout the early 1960s.

In 1961, the White House Conference on Aging found in its report that the number of people over 65 was expected to double over the next forty years, at which point people over the 65 would account for one in ten citizens (Shock 1023). In general, the elderly were “likely to live in older, less adequate houses and [...] have lower incomes than the rest of the population” (Shock 1025). In fact, in 1965, more than six million Americans over the age of 65 were found to have yearly incomes below \$2,000 (“Neglected oldsters”). This put them well below the average family income of the time, which amounted to \$7,680 that year (“Are you average?”).

⁵³ Florida even exhibited a Retirement Home (priced between \$12,000 and \$13,000) at the New York World Fair of 1964-1965, playing into the illusion of life in such a surrounding being the norm and attainable to most (“Florida Retirement Home Planned at World’s Fair”).

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In an effort to accommodate the growing numbers of elderly citizens, U.S. legislation responded to their needs, in particular with regards to homeownership. One example of this is tax legislation passed in the state of Oregon in 1964 which provided property tax exemptions to allow elderly homeowners to remain in their homes without having to pay excessive property taxes after paying off their mortgages. These exemptions were available to homeowners who were 65 and older. If annual pension payments were no more than \$2,500, depending on age, certain percentages were deducted from one's taxes. If annual income exceeded \$2,500, a taxpayer could choose alternatives such as tax deferments for the rest of his life. Other states followed suit with similar tax benefits for retired homeowners in order to attract well-off retirees whose purchases of goods and services could provide economic benefits to a region akin to those provided by any new branch of industry: “Catering to retired people clearly is getting to be a big business in this country” (“For Retired People”). This held particularly true for the upper middle classes approaching retirement age who could, especially upon sale of their current homes, afford quality retirement housing. Consequently, the retirement community, providing the opportunity of homeownership among people one's own age, gained in popularity and became an additional form of homeownership for middle class Americans to aspire to.

On February 9, 1959, *LIFE* published a story entitled “Big Sellers of Sunshine”, featuring Port Charlotte, a development which would ultimately be able to house up to 200,000 people. Home prices started at \$6,960 and ranged up to \$18,060 for homes along the waterfront. Considering the low annual income of the elderly, these are steep prices indeed, making these homes affordable to only the fraction of the elderly who were the targeted consumer group for this development. The article's author dedicated two pages to introducing some of Port Charlotte's homeowners who owned homes along the same street. The people featured here were elderly and retired couples or widowers. In addition, all of them had the same professional blue collar background: auto workers, store clerks, a store manager and a farmer now found themselves to be neighbors (“Big Sellers of Sunshine” 80). The selection of these homeowners for the article implies that segregation among occupational lines continues even once homeowners are retired.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The argument that occupational/educational segregation continued within retirement communities is supported by a newspaper article on the Port Charlotte development. According to the article, a large portion of homeowners within the development were retired policemen which led to salesmen declaring the neighborhood as “official police retirement community” (“Those Mean Ol' Policemen”).

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In 1963, *LIFE* informed its readers that “[b]y the hundreds, ‘retirement towns’ are springing up across the country” and went on to exclaim how “many are like a country club with a medical plan” (“Widening World of Retirement Towns” 93). To liken these communities to country clubs adds a sense of exclusiveness and accomplishment to them. By choosing this wording, the authors suggested that entering into such a community was a sign of success. Within “Widening World of Retirement Towns”, the author took a look at one particular development called “Leisure World”. It was located near Los Angeles and provided room for up to 8,000 inhabitants on 500 acres. Within the article’s first paragraphs, *LIFE* stated how “Retirement communities are the biggest private housing projects being built in the U.S. today” (“Widening World of Retirement Towns” 93).

The images featured in the article support the comparison to a country club, in particular because both race as well as gender lines are drawn very clearly. None of the images presented in *LIFE* featured an African American or any other minority resident. The men moved in their own social circles, apart from their wives and the widowed women: playing shuffleboard or singing in the men’s choir. The women, meanwhile, partook in activities such as a chorus line in a theatrical production or weight reduction clubs. Leisure World’s theme song featured a line advising the community’s female inhabitants to “tint your hair and keep it curled, and stalk your prey at Leisure World” (“Widening World of Retirement Towns” 95). The article featured an image of the weight reduction club, depicting women only who had gained weight between two meetings. They were forced to wear signs referring to them as “pigs” and sing the “pig song” (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: Women in the weight reduction club who gained weight had to refer to themselves as „pigs“. By including the picture, *LIFE* suggests that a woman’s looks are her greatest asset at any age.

The suggestion here seems to be that even at a late age, a woman’s looks are her greatest asset.

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A feature of the article about a resident’s wedding suggests that even at a late age, finding a husband is a woman’s highest goal. According to the article, there were 2,400 single ladies living in Leisure World “and their hearts must have lifted with hope recently when the first wedding took place on the community premises”. The bride, age 65, had been a widow for 13 years, and told the magazine that “I never expected to remarry [...] but he made himself so indispensable” (“Widening World of Retirement Towns” 100). The message here is that even in a retirement community that offers medical supervision as well as household services, a man is “indispensable” to a woman.

Life in retirement communities comparable to country clubs, such as Leisure World, was not accessible to the majority of American elderly. This is illustrated by predictions that the demand for single family houses for coming decades would decline markedly, precisely because of the changing age structure of American society. Households with heads over the age of 55 (as well as those below the age of 25) were generally expected to be “in the market for rental units and mobile homes” (“Increase in Mobile Home Market Seen”). In 1956, legislation was enacted by Congress to “facilitate construction of public housing developments with 15 per cent of the units especially designed for older tenants with small incomes”. While 15 per cent may seem like a sizable portion to be designated for senior citizens, “[this] is by no means enough to meet the need” (Hart).

For those retirees who neither qualified for public housing options, nor had the means to buy one of the “regular” homes constructed in developments such as Port Charlotte, mobile homes were the only viable option. Often, mobile homes were grouped around facilities such as club houses, swimming pools and golf courses, so that they offered the same amenities for a much lower price than the high-end housing developments for retirees. As one article put it: “Trailer communities are offering the possibility of country club living at Social Security prices to the nation’s retired citizens” (“Trailer Living Draws Retirees”). The price of a trailer in such developments, including the lot it was placed on, was around \$8,000, which was still well above the Social Security price level indicated by the previous quote, but below the prices of those retirement communities primarily featured in *LIFE*: While Port Charlotte offered its cheapest houses (the smallest and located furthest from the seaside) for \$8,040 including the lot, the majority of home prices were higher, with other units selling for as much as \$18,060 (“Big Sellers of Sunshine” 77). Other developments did not feature homes as close in price to the trailers’ \$8,000 option. Palm City, California, a \$30 million development near Palm Springs for persons aged 50 and more, featured homes selling for \$12,995 to \$17,250

(“\$30 Million Housing Project for Persons Aged 50 or More”), while another development (Sun City, Arizona) that was comparable to Port Charlotte, offered houses in a price range between \$9,150 and \$14,550 (“No Kids Allowed!”). Considering that the average income of retirees at the time was estimated to be around \$2,000 per year (“Neglected Oldsters”), even the trailer for \$8,000 was a luxury generally affordable only to those who were homeowners before retirement and thus could muster a down payment after selling their pre-retirement home. Generally, “nearly all” inhabitants of these developments were former homeowners who, upon selling their regular homes, “had enough money to buy a lot and a mobile home” (“Trailer Living Draws Retirees”). As a result, mobile homes were increasingly accepted “as part of the one family home market [...] evident in the granting by the Federal Housing Administration of mortgage loans up to 90 per cent to developers of mobile home parks” (“Growth of Mobile Home Parks Reflects a Peripatetic Economy”).⁵⁵ While demand and supply of these affordable housing options for retirees were on the rise, they were not considered relevant for *LIFE*’s homeownership discourse.

Since mobile homes were affordable only to a fraction of American elderly, demand in apartments was on the rise, and apartment buildings accounted for almost one-third of all new residential construction between 1957 and 1962 (“Apartment Boom Seen in Midwest”). When questioned about this development, banks “cited the changing age composition of population as one of the factors underlying the recent spurt in apartment activity and accompanying sluggishness in single family home construction” (“Apartment Boom Seen in Midwest”). And yet, as pointed out in a 6-page piece in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1965, often these modern apartments were hardly affordable to the retirees. There is also a further distinction to be kept in mind: of the 16,800,000 Americans over the age of 65 at the time, two thirds lived in their own homes, but these homes were generally old and often dilapidated, and selling them would not provide the owners with the necessary cash to move into an elegant retirement community, especially since they had hardly any liquid assets (Horwitz 84). However, even though a sizable portion of America’s elderly could not afford life in a retirement community, the elderly were increasingly isolated from the rest of the population, as they often lived on their own and no longer in multi-generation homes along with their extended families. In 1965, the *New York Times Magazine* observed:

⁵⁵ Ads generally praised mobile home retiree communities not for their low prices. Rather, they pointed out the advantages of not having to take care of a regular home which would save you time: “You’ll have more time for fun and pleasant occupations because your mobile home requires so little care” (“Why Retirees are Happiest in a Mobilife Community”).

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The isolation of the aged in the second half of the 20th century is almost absolute. The homes with three generations in them have vanished almost as completely as memories of the depression. There are sizable communities in America with no aged people visible on the streets. There are 60 self-contained retirement communities in the United States with only aged persons. (Horwitz 25)

One sentence from this quote is particularly striking: “The homes with three generations in them have vanished almost as completely as memories of the depression”. This statement links the necessity for three generations to share a home with the deprivations caused by the Great Depression. By the early 1960s, in a time of abundance, and for this modern middle class, sharing a home with one’s parents and children was simply no longer *en vogue* – at least according to *LIFE*. In July, 1959, it introduced its readership to Annie Mahaffey, an elderly lady unable to afford a home of her own in old age. Consequently, she lived with her son, his wife Mary, and their seven children in a six-room house in Philadelphia. *LIFE*’s choice of title (“In a Dutiful Family Trials with Mother”) already implied that multi-generation housing was not an ideal solution. The article’s author refers to the situation as “a sad, familiar drama of old age” (“In a Dutiful Family Trials with Mother” 16). Annie competes with the children “for importance in the family” (21).

The article painted an image in stark contrast to that of the women in *Leisure World*: Annie feeling left out – sitting alone in her chair while Mary phoned her own mother, or talked with a friend at the kitchen table. In addition to describing how little privacy Mary and her husband could enjoy with Annie in the house and in their kitchen at all times, the article also emphasized the difference in age as a source of conflict: “Between Annie and 37-year-old Mary lies an unbridged gulf separating a bygone, rigid way and today’s lenient life” (“In a Dutiful Family Trials with Mother” 24). The ways in which *LIFE* portrayed this situation sent a clear message: if an aging parent could not afford to buy a place in a retirement community and lived with his or her children instead, both the parent and the family had to make sacrifices, and neither side could supposedly be happy with the arrangement. The editors had chosen the images carefully with two things in common: telling glares and the absence of laughter. This is exemplified very well by the two images below (Figure 4.3): The left-hand image showed Annie with one of her granddaughters, telling her of her misfortunes throughout life. The girl looks timid and somewhat afraid of her grandmother, who looms above her with a stern look on her face. The image on the right side was supposedly taken

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after Annie scolded one of her grandsons, and the boy ran to his mother who is seen comforting him and telling her mother-in-law that “he is only a child”. The look that Mary gives Annie sums up the tensions present in the household.

When comparing these photographs with the ones from the article on Leisure World, it becomes very clear that *LIFE* strove to portray the segregation along age lines as the better way to live for all generations. Otherwise, one would have to endure “trials with mother” and cramped living quarters supposedly comparable to the deprivations of the Great Depression. Owning one’s home in a community befitting one’s age, with others of similar general background, income and race, was portrayed as something to aspire to for all Americans.



Figure 4.2: The choice of images, which focus in particular on the looks exchanged between the home’s inhabitants, underlines the tensions the article discusses at length.

African Americans in White Middle-Class Suburbia

The segregation of homeowners by age was a relatively new development of this time, but another kind of segregation continued – that by race. The Kennedy administration had passed the *Executive Order 11063 for Equal Opportunity in Housing* in November, 1962. The Order was aimed at “preventing discrimination in federally owned and operated housing and related facilities” because such discrimination was deemed to be depriving “many Americans of equal opportunity in the exercise of their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Kennedy). It is crucial to note the limitations inherent in this order: it pertained to federal housing programs only, excluding private construction. Barriers to the coveted life in the suburbs, therefore, remained in place, and the very good housing available there remained untouched by Kennedy’s resolution. This is illustrated, for example, in the case of New York City: about 50 percent of housing within the city was built with government assistance, while housing constructed in the city’s suburbs was privately financed (MacDonald & Tough 160).

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So in order to get a house in the suburbs, African Americans still mostly had to deal with opposition on their own, and opposition by many remained fierce. Racial prejudices were bolstered by economic arguments: media and businesses claimed that African American neighbors drove down home values. Some speculators – so-called “blockbusters” - fostered this unfounded fear to make as quick and large a profit as possible.

The tactics of blockbusting were explained in “Kenwood Foils the Blockbuster”, a *Harper’s Magazine* article from August, 1963: Once a black family with a middle-class income moved into a “good” (white) neighborhood, some of their white neighbors, afraid of falling real estate prices, began to sell their homes – often below market prices, which turned the myth of minority neighbors causing real estate values to drop into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once these houses were on the market for below-average prices, the blockbusters stepped in, furthering the growing panic among white homeowners by sponsoring black figureheads to buy the houses. Most of the time, these figureheads were low-income families who were lured in by the blockbusters with cheap loans and the prospect of becoming owners of a home they could not usually afford. In order to pay back their loans, many of these low-income homeowners converted their houses into multi-family dwellings, subletting the homes so as to increase their income. The *Harper’s Magazine* article explained this as follows:

[B]lock-busters lured home-hungry illiterates into ‘contract sales’, telling them they could afford installment payments of several hundred dollars a month by filling houses with roomers. The ‘buyers’ were obliged to rent every foot, leaving only garages and kitchens for themselves. (Richey 44)

The focus here lies not on the race of the figurehead buyers, but on their educational background (and, by implication, their professional background as well). The author described them as “home-hungry illiterates” who supposedly fell for the blockbusters’ scheme only because they did not know any better and could not foresee the difficulties lying ahead. The white homeowners within the neighborhood did not see it this way, however. Racial prejudices that had been honed by centuries of segregation and slavery were exploited by the blockbusters who instilled a new fear in white homeowners: that of declining property values. By luring large numbers of black, low-income families into the targeted neighborhood, blockbusters exacerbated already existing racial prejudices by combining them with class prejudices and consciousness. These took on various shapes in combination with the question of racially mixed neighborhoods. One such form was identified by Princeton sociologist Marvin Bressler among white, lower middle class Levittown-homeowners in 1960. According

to his observations, strongest opposition to mixed neighborhoods emanated from white members of the lower middle classes who found themselves in the middle of the “process of uncertain transit to the suburban middle class”. A member of these families usually held an industrial job, which led to a “disparity between his relative economic affluence and his modest occupational prestige” (Bressler 133). Consequently, the home served as a means to gather additional prestige. However, by the early 1960s, this logic of *conspicuous consumption* extended beyond the house and included one’s community as a whole, “which if it is to serve this purpose satisfactorily must then represent a pure distillate of middle-class lifestyles”. This “pure distillate”, extending to *appearances* only, allowed for different educational and occupational backgrounds among neighbors, but any visible markers (such as race or income, expressed in cars and upkeep of the home) were to be class appropriate.

According to Bressler, white, upper-middle class homeowners who were more secure in their social position and derived more prestige from their educational and professional background would not have the same fears as lower-income homeowners. Here, the economic aspect may well have played a considerable role: afraid of their “nest egg” losing value, people would band together to either stop the influx of minority homeowners, or move away, leaving the field wide open for the blockbusters. This fear of one’s home losing value may have been amplified by the time’s focus on elderly homeowners and the need to pay a sizable down payment to join an exclusive retirement community. As multigenerational homes became less common and comforts and social status became increasingly important issues for retired life, so did the financial security of one’s home.

A third, class-related issue about integrated neighborhoods affected the black upper-middle-class homeowners. Generally, blockbusters did not enter a completely white neighborhood but rather waited until at least one home was owned by African Americans. These pioneers were generally well-educated families with sufficient incomes to comfortably buy a home in a white suburb, even though they often had to pay inflated prices (Bressler).

Keen on escaping the inner cities and moving into better school districts and more spacious and modern homes, these homeowners viewed the poorer and less educated blockbuster figureheads with as much contempt, if not more, as their white neighbors. The article in *Harper’s Magazine* quoted one African American homeowner’s wife, explaining that “when white people are forced out by slums, they have a choice of places to go. We don’t. We can only keep on moving ahead of the slum – an awful prospect” (Richey 45). The article also lamented that “Many real-estate brokers who are sticklers for protecting standard-

of-living homogeneity where whites are concerned ignore the concept for Negroes, whom they lump in one class” (Richey 44).

By the early 1960s, even when pioneering black families who moved into white suburbs were educated and well off, there was widespread fear that blockbusters would follow on their heels. When a white homeowner became certain that the black neighbor was the beginning of an influx of more minority neighbors, he would be induced to sell his house quickly to avoid losing money from falling home prices. This move made the home attractive for the blockbusting speculator who could make steep profits with this technique. For example, a white homeowner might sell his home for \$12,000 for fear of the price to go down further if he waited any longer. A black figurehead family, in turn, might be charged \$20,000 for the same house by the blockbusters (Arnold). In order to speed up the process, it was in the blockbuster’s best interest to spread rumors about a mass minority movement into a neighborhood, thus causing and exacerbating panic sales. This is illustrated by the case of Park Hill, a white suburb of Denver, Colorado, where in 1961, a sudden scare caused a considerable number of homeowners to put their homes up for sale:

The reason for the scare was the report that there was a full scale invasion of minority groups, principally Negroes, into Park Hill district. The Denver Post says unscrupulous real estate agent operators were encouraging the ‘invasion’ rumors [...] Of the 9,000 homes in Park Hill, only 75 are now occupied by Negroes. The Negroes who did move in were civic-minded, as responsible and concerned with maintaining their homes as were the white families they replaced. (“More or Less Personal”, 1961)

It is crucial to note the term employed here: supposedly an “invasion” is taking place. I mentioned above how, in many instances, the black figurehead homeowners used by blockbusters to cause panic sales, were themselves victims of a scam, lured in by false hopes and promises. Yet, by representing them as “invaders” they were portrayed as scheming individuals who – like an army – took over the neighborhood, leaving nothing but burned and worthless land. A second aspect to note about the quote above is the special attention drawn to black neighbors being just as “civic-minded” and “concerned with maintaining their home as were the white families”. This is an interesting parallel to the 1930s owner-renter rhetoric I discussed in chapter 1. As mentioned there, one of the most durable positive associations with homeownership was the claim that owners, as opposed to renters, had a stake in their houses (and, by extension, their country) which made them responsible citizens who took good care

of their property and formed the backbone of American democracy, while renters or families requiring public housing options could not be expected to do the same. By taking pointing out that black homeowners have the same positive qualities that white homeowners supposedly had, the article attempted to separate groups not along race lines, but rather along class lines. Those middle-class African Americans who did not rely on blockbusters to buy a home, but rather could afford the down payment required in a “regular” real estate transaction were deemed to be as responsible as their white counterparts, while those black families relying on low payments offered by blockbusters were deemed comparable to the white families relying on public housing options or renting. The article in *Harper’s Magazine* also highlighted that racial prejudices were bound to disappear once a person noticed he shared the same values as his neighbor: “As elsewhere, when whites and Negroes live in one community as equals, proximity tended to dissolve racial hostility and suspicion” (Richey 47). The class prejudices exhibited by the neighborhood’s residents were of no concern to the article’s author.

In 1960, a special report to the *Commission on Race and Housing* was published that examined the impact on property values resulting from the movement of African Americans into white neighborhoods.⁵⁶ The report, entitled “Property Values and Race; Studies in Seven Cities”, was authored by Luigi Laurenti, and it looked at 10,000 real estate transactions to determine a possible decline in housing values once minority homeowners inhabited the neighborhood. Laurenti covered a nine year period of transactions in San Francisco and Philadelphia, with supporting evidence from Chicago, Kansas City, Detroit and Portland. According to the report, 41% of neighborhoods entered by nonwhites showed no change in

⁵⁶ The Commission was an independent citizens’ group founded in 1955. When originally constituted it featured the following 17 members: Gordon W. Allport (Professor of Psychology, Harvard University), Elliott V. Bell (Chairman of the Executive Committee and Director, McGraw-Hill Publishing Company; Editor and Publisher, *Business Week*), Laird Bell (Attorney: Bell, Boyd, Marshall and Lloyd, Chicago), Reverend John J. Cavanaugh, C.S.C. (Director, University of Notre Dame Foundation), Peter Grimm (Chairman of the Board and Director, William A. White and Sons, New York), Charles S. Johnson (President, Fisk University), Charles Keller, Jr. (President, Keller Construction Corporation, New Orleans, Louisiana), Clark Kerr (President, UC Berkeley), Philip M. Klutznick (Chairman of the Board, American Community Builders, Inc.), **Henry R. Luce** (Editor-in-Chief, *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, *Architectural Forum*, *House and Home*, and *Sports Illustrated*), Stanley Marcus (President, Neiman-Marcus, Dallas, Texas), Harold C. McClellan (President, Old Colony Paint and Chemical Company, Los Angeles), Ward Melville (President, Melville Shoe Corporation, New York), Francis T. P. Plimpton (Attorney: Debevoise, Plimpton and McLean, New York), R. Stewart Rauch, Jr. (President, The Philadelphia Saving Fund Society), Robert R. Taylor (Secretary and Executive Director, Illinois Federal Savings and Loan Association), Earl B. Schwulst (Chairman President and Chairman of the Board, The Bowery Savings Bank, New York). (Source: <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.CRH&q=Social%20workers>). The Commission was funded by “The Fund for the Republic”, a national, non-partisan organization which became particularly known for its financial backing of studies in support of the Constitution and against McCarthyism.

price levels, 44% showed a comparative rise between 5% and 26%, and 15% showed a comparative decline between 5 and 9% (“More or Less Personal”, 1960).

While Henry Luce was a founding member of the *Commission on Race and Housing*, he did not cause the results of this study, or calls for integrated neighborhoods, to be featured prominently in *LIFE*. The magazine may have been “generally supportive of African Americans’ civil rights” (Kozol 160), but its visual attention lay with representations of African Americans as family members rather than as political activists. No African American families portrayed within the magazine throughout these years were explicitly portrayed as homeowners. Furthermore, “[while] condemning racial violence, the journalistic pressure to be objective (and perhaps also a desire not to alienate Southern readers) resulted in the inclusion of a sympathetic photo-essay about white segregationists” (Kozol 162).

The fear of possibly alienating Southern readers (and advertisers) was likely the reason that the only piece within *LIFE* that dealt with African American homeowners in white suburbia was an excerpt from a novel and not an article. The story of blockbusting in Kenwood would have been a perfect opportunity for *LIFE*’s editors to feature a photo essay. Instead, they chose a fictional piece, an excerpt from the novel *Peacable Lane* by *LIFE* associate editor Keith Wheeler. The fictional nature of the text allowed the magazine to distance itself from the views expressed within even though the author belonged to *LIFE*’s staff. Published in August, 1960, the excerpt was entitled “Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street”. The novel featured an African American couple wanting to move into a white middle class suburb to get their son out of the inner city. The white inhabitants are outraged – most of them voice fears over their property values and quite a few utter racial slurs at a community meeting called to discuss the matter. The part of the book describing this community meeting was the excerpt printed in *LIFE*. At the outset of the scene, the book’s characters carefully admit to each other that their meeting to prevent this man and his family from moving into their neighborhood is not ethical. Most importantly, it is not “popular” because supposedly public opinion is swaying in favor of integration. One participant tells his neighbors that it will be hard to get a broker to support them in guaranteeing that the house in question will be sold to white buyers only. Wheeler has the character saying: “They are all afraid to be accused of – ah, discrimination when this becomes public. No legitimate broker dares to involve himself” (“Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street” 73). This particular scene in Wheeler’s novel illustrates the hypocrisy involved when arguing that one does not have a problem with minorities and that one only wants to preserve one’s own home’s value. Because while all

characters present claim that their sole concern is to preserve their property’s value, racial slurs abound.⁵⁷ By the end of the scene, the neighbors agree to form a syndicate to purchase the house themselves, which would be costly, but less so than losing a third or fourth of their respective homes’ value. Not all of those present agree to this solution lightly. One of the men present exclaims: “What we do here, I know in my heart, is wrong” (“Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street” 77). One of the women tries to convince her neighbors that they should welcome the potential new neighbors regardless of their skin color: “Being a Christian is not just words, not just going to church, not just Sunday is a day of rest [...] Can we refuse this man [...] and ever again walk into a church on Sunday without guilt?” (“Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street” 78). Her words are not heeded, however, and in the end the only one who votes against the decision is a man who does so not based on any religious grounds or the conviction that blacks and whites are equal, but rather because he is also a union leader, who is afraid to lose upcoming elections otherwise if word of this comes out (30% of his union’s members are African Americans). He does provide money to the syndicate secretly, in cash, with no records of his participation (“Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street” 80) – once more an incident included by Wheeler to make clear to his readers how hypocritical these homeowners behave.

The excerpt ends with the words, “Anyway you slice this, it’s a mess” (“Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street” 84), which again appears more sympathetic to the white homeowners’ plight than the previous focus on their hypocrisy would have suggested. The whole novel is as ambivalent, which makes it comparable to the weak stand taken by *LIFE* in the whole debate of racism – while sympathetic to African Americans’ plights for equality, the aforementioned piece showing segregationists in a positive light illustrates this.

Within the novel itself, Matt, one of the two men who head the syndicate, gets accosted by two men threatening him to stop blocking the move: “I had hoped you would be amenable to reason. Since you have chosen otherwise, I regret it. I must say to you once more, you, too, will regret it” (Wheeler 128). This allusion to blockbusting techniques is not included in the excerpt, but it takes up some room within the whole novel.

As the novel continues, Matt finds out that the black man interested in buying the house is a colleague of his with whom he has always worked and gotten along with well. Suddenly ashamed, he betrays the syndicate and enables his colleague to buy the house. As a result,

⁵⁷ One example of this is the character of Laura Cusack who snaps: “If my boy associates with niggers, it will be over my dead body” (74).

hostilities ensue. Even those who publicly advocate equality of black and white (Matt’s boss, for instance) play a very different tune in private. The book ends with the death of the African American homeowner, Lamar Winter, in a car accident. As the book comes to an end, the adults involved in the story agree that maybe their children’s generation will figure out how to live together peacefully. On the surface, *Peacable Lane* may appear to be advocating an end to racial segregation in the suburbs, but at the same time it suggests that now may not be the time to do so, because people are not ready yet – rather, that it may be up for the coming generation to deal with this. Matt is quoted as saying: “He [Lamar Winter] believed that his son and our children had at least a chance to find a way to live together in peace – possibly even friendship” (Wheeler 343).

Reactions to the excerpt were mixed. Six letters to the editor about the excerpt were published in *LIFE*’s September 5, 1960 issue. Three of them claimed that Wheeler’s implied criticism of the whites was misguided. One referred to “the pitiful article by Keith Wheeler” and suggested that *LIFE* “get a planeload of such writers and take off for the Congo, where they can not only see Negroes in action, but be on the receiving end” (“Letters to the editors” 14). Another letter, failing to pick up on the hypocrisy of those assembled in the community meeting, argued, “The color of a man’s skin *does* make a difference” and proceeded to tell a story about a friend whose home had drastically declined in value as a black family moved in down the street. A third letter called on “anyone” in a comparable situation “to run - Eventually you’ll have to anyway”. One of the letters was from a reader who had been shocked to recognize himself among this group of characters (“I had a feeling of disgust for the characters portrayed – until I analyzed myself in the same light”), and one made no judgment on the scene depicted but rather justified himself and his acquaintances by pointing out “I have met many people like myself who are perfectly willing to sell to Negroes, or any other decent persons with financial responsibility” (“Letters to the editors” 14). The negative letters demonstrate how – even with a piece of fiction – *LIFE*’s inclusion of African American homeowners in white neighborhoods, alienated a portion of its readership. This may have been a cause for the editors to abolish future inclusion of the subject.

While blockbusting was largely omitted from the pages of *LIFE*, it certainly was on homeowners’ minds – the articles I quoted from above also attest to the fact that the issue was discussed in media of the time. Possibly in response to increased worries of homeowners that they may become victims of blockbusters, the term “realtor” was increasingly employed in advertisements. While the term had been registered as a trademark in 1949, during my

research I found that throughout the early 1960s, much attention was paid to distinguishing licensed realtors from “real estate operators”, a term which appears throughout articles on blockbusting.⁵⁸ “Realtors” had to adhere to a so-called “Code of Ethics” which was imposed by the National Association of Realtors. Until 1950, this Code had explicitly banned realtors from selling homes to African Americans within a white suburb: “A realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, *members of any race or nationality* or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood” (“New Realty Code Will Help Negroes”; italics added by me). The Code was altered in 1950 and henceforth stated: “The realtor should not be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or use which would clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood” (quoted in “New Realty Code Will Help Negroes”). In effect, the 1950 amendment to the “Code of Ethics” still encouraged racial discrimination, although less explicitly. Furthermore, the National Association of Real Estate Boards positioned itself firmly against proposed legislation that would put a definite end to housing segregation. In 1963, the Association promoted a “property owner’s bill of rights” which was “intended to relieve the profession of any obligation to promote open-occupancy housing” (Fowler).⁵⁹

The “Code of Ethics” (and with it the implication that an owner could have assurance that his home would not be sold to African American) also found its way into realtors’ advertisements. One example of this is Figure 4.4, an advertisement which explains that “you can be a happy homebuyer” but only “if you buy through a realtor”. The advertisement’s image displays a well-dressed man, smiling encouragingly, and presenting the viewer a house on a tray, implying that buying a home with the help of a realtor will make the process of becoming a homeowner as simple as taking a dinner plate from a waiter. Quite explicitly the accompanying lines establish that a realtor is “more than just a ‘real estate broker’” because he is “a leader in his field” – suggesting that he is an expert rather than “just” a salesman. What is more, the advertisement boasts “[a]s one pledged to an established Code of Ethics, a Realtor is guided by the Golden Rule.” The choice of words is noteworthy because the Golden Rule (“Do to others what you want them to do to you”) is rooted so firmly in the

⁵⁸ As a matter of fact, various articles dealing with negative real estate practices feature the term “real estate operator” as opposed to realtor. See, for example, Crosby: “real estate operators have forgotten there are any rules.”

⁵⁹ The Association’s stance did not change over the years to come. In 1972, geographer William Brown lamented in his paper how “The real estate industry has long been recognized as one of the major institutions in American society whose policies and practices have consistently and forcefully worked to perpetuate racial discrimination in housing” (Brown 66).

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Christian belief system. Therefore, this particular phrasing implies that a realtor will act as a good Christian, and thus a good person, and that he will have your best interest at heart just as much as he would wish you to do if roles were reversed.⁶⁰

Other advertisements focusing on the advantages of employing a licensed realtor when purchasing a home told the reader: “Consult a REALTOR and be SAFE” (Figure 4.5). Safe from what? In the context of blockbusting this safety may well be a safety from falling home values caused by blockbusting – consult a realtor and be safe in the knowledge that this is well—invested money. Alternatively, this may also tap into the fear of unforeseen costs attached to homeownership which, at the time, cause the previously discussed rise in foreclosure rates. Another advertisement called on people: “Before you Buy – Be Sure” (Figure 4.6). Sure of what? It may imply that by consulting a realtor, one can make sure one does not buy into a “blighted” area in which blockbusting may already be taking place. The fact that the National Association of Real Estate Boards was so intent on portraying itself as anti-blockbusting (and, somewhat veiled, as anti-open-housing) may also have played a role in *LIFE*’s careful approach to the matter. In the late 1960s, the Association was becoming the largest trade association within the United States, with over 400,000 members by the early 1970s (National Association of Realtors).

You can be a
**HAPPY HOME
BUYER...**

if you buy through
a **REALTOR...**

Here's Why—

As more than just a "real estate broker"—as a leader in his field as attested by his membership in his local board of Realtors and the National Association of Real Estate Boards—he has the widest variety of "for sale" listings suited to every taste and pocketbook.

Through his continuing professional training, a Realtor knows residential values, tax, development, and neighborhood trends... how to match the right family with the right house.

As one pledged to an established Code of Ethics, a Realtor is guided by the Golden Rule. He is interested in more than just this sale... he wants the house to be right for you so that he can serve you and your friends in the future.

Madison Board of Realtors, Inc.

Figure 4.3: In times of blockbusting, realtor advertisements focused on a realtor’s Code of Ethics and the Golden Rule

⁶⁰ In the context of the „good Christian“ it is also interesting to note that local Realty Boards presented annual awards in categories such as “Outstanding Citizen of the Year”, thereby implying that realtors ultimately had the community’s best interest at heart as well (see “Realty Board Will Present Two Top Awards Tonight”).



Figure 4.4: The decision to print the words “realtor” and “safe” both bold, equates the two terms: Realtor equals safety.

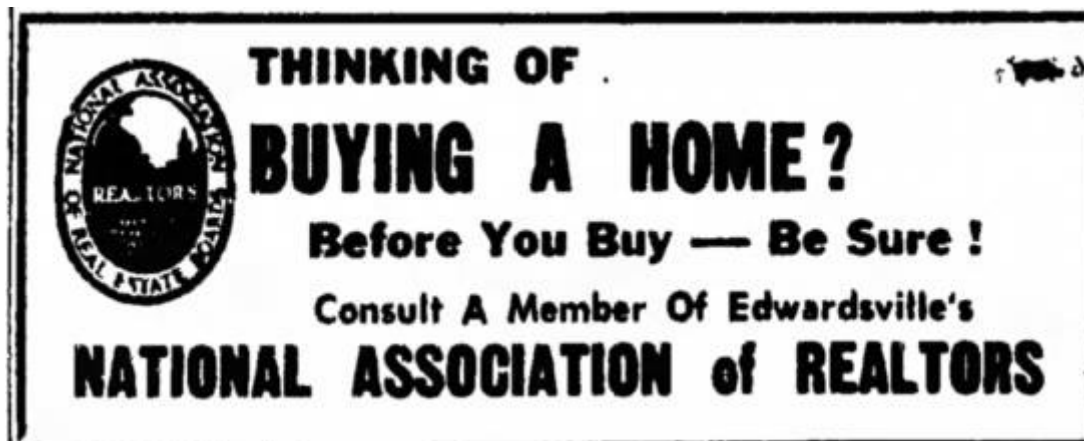


Figure 4.5: The line “Before you buy – be sure” implies that members of the National Association of Realtors always have their customers’ (as opposed to their own) interests at heart.

Themed Neighborhoods and Vacation Homes

The previous chapter discussed *LIFE*'s portrayal of the Van Nuys Garden Development. The article's author had pointed out that the primary advantage of the homes which were identical, compact and offered little to no privacy from neighbors' eyes, was their proximity to both beaches and mountains. Owning a home in this development allowed inhabitants to quickly and easily reach destinations where they could spend their leisure time. With working class homeownership on the rise in the early 1960s, developments such as this were on the rise as well. By 1964, six out of ten home-owning families had incomes of under \$8,000 a year (Hemming) and to cater to this particular income group, the construction of large-scale monotonous developments continued, as truly individualized homes remained out of reach for the working class homeowner.

The rise in working class homeownership can be traced back to increasingly easy loan availability. This availability also provided better-off households with the opportunity to own second homes. In 1959, *LIFE* – no longer discussing working class homeownership options - published an article entitled “Second Homes for Family Vacations”, predicting that a second house may even become a new norm: “In the expanding U.S. economy owning a second

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home may become almost as common as the second car [...] Two million Americans already own them and 75,000 more will be built this year” (50).

The article’s author praised the increase in holiday homes and pointed out that such homes supposedly provided an outlet for new design ideas, incorporating some of the design elements championed by *LIFE* throughout the preceding years: “When it is a holiday house, even conservative families accept unusual forms” (“Second Homes for Family Vacations” 50). Two of the images accompanying the article supported this claim – one of a home referred to as a cigar box (Figure 4.7) and one described as a milk carton (Figure 4.8). These houses were priced at \$13,750 and \$7,000 respectively, which made them considerably more expensive than a little holiday cabin also mentioned in the article which could be built for \$1,200 (“Second Homes for Family Vacations” 54) and which looked more like a garden shed than a piece of courageous architecture. And yet the holiday cabin is the only home priced below the cost of the regular homes introduced in this chapter so far.

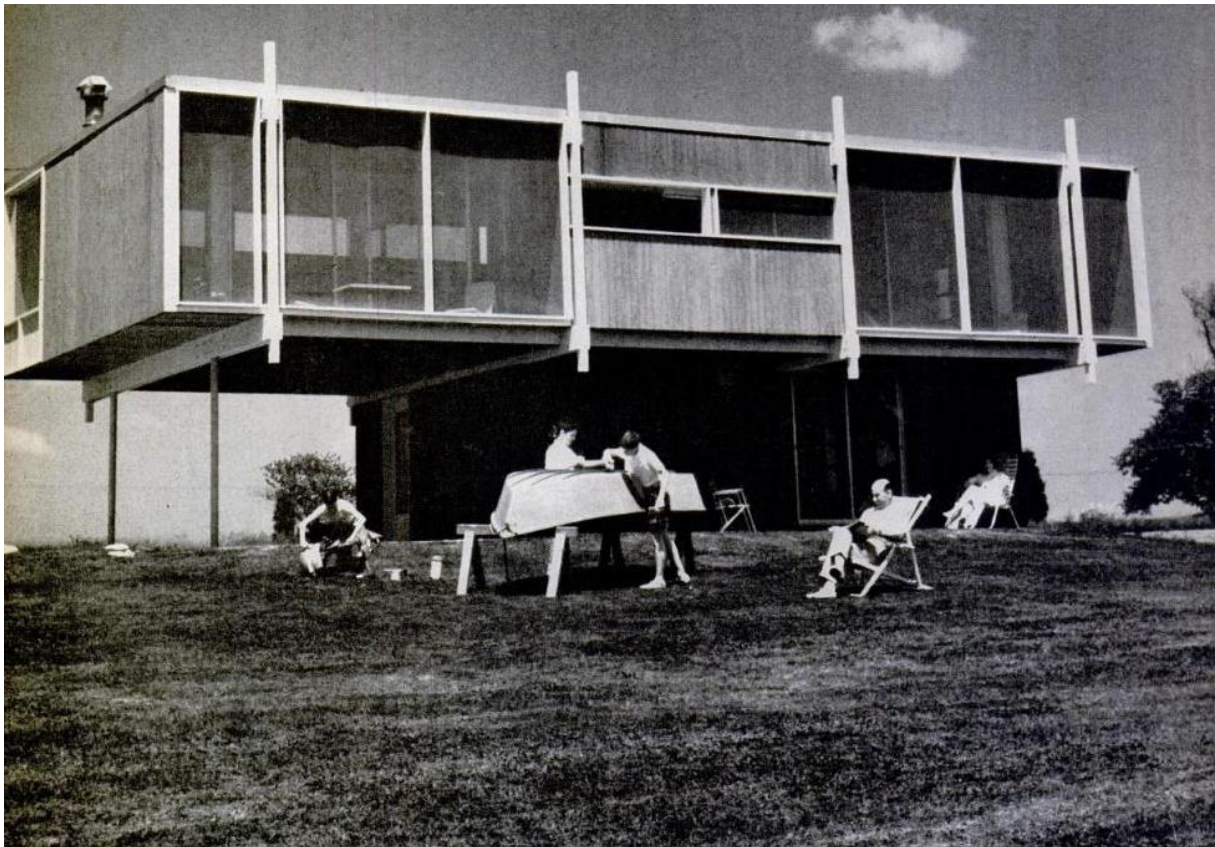


Figure 4.6: While not exhibiting a body of water nearby, the boat that the two children are working on suggests that the house is located near an ocean or lake.



Figure 4.7: The ways in which the home affords leisure opportunities are the clear focus of this image.

The vacation homes in *LIFE* were hardly attainable by most people, but newspapers across the nation provided ideas for cheaper options while banks and loan institutions offered increasing numbers of financing opportunities for second homes:

Some savings and loan associations already have set up plans whereby second homes may be financed by loaning money against the equity in a family's permanent home. Low initial cost of the second home often makes it possible to keep monthly payments to no more than average automobile payments. (“Western Pine Aids Home Construction”)

According to Department of Commerce figures from 1963, vacation homes were purchased by households making \$7,500 a year or more, which applied to 13 million households (“4% of Area Families Own Vacation Home”). Considering that there were 57 million American households in 1960 according to census data (“Did You Know?”), vacation homes were an option for about 22% of American households.

In addition to holiday homes, *LIFE* also featured articles about suburbs that had little in common with such suburbs as the Van Nuys Garden Development or Levittown. Instead, readers were introduced to a new kind of housing development in the 1962 article “A Place for Every Taste – and Every Taste in Its Place”. The article's headline deserves some additional attention: “A Place for Every Taste” suggests a freedom of choice to prospective homeowners, implying that their tastes (and possibly needs) will be met in one neighborhood or the other. Yet, the second half of the headline “Every Taste in Its Place” is much more restrictive for it suggests that each taste (and, implicitly, class and race) is supposed to be in

its place instead of striving outside of it. This sense of limitation is further underscored by the author’s focus on how “organized” these neighborhoods will be:

This new mode of organized life will be as precisely thought out as a Japanese garden, with each beach, bog and bluff utilized to provide a special aura for people of special tastes. Similar visions, being promoted all over the U.S., will permit Americans to make leisure an integral part of their lives without having to rush away from home in harried pursuit of it. (“A Place for Every Taste – and Every Taste in Its Place” 122)

It is noteworthy that the article promised readers an “organized” life in an area so well planned that even nature could be tamed so as to be “utilized” as homeowners saw fit. While no mention was made of the current civil unrest or fears of blockbusting, the promise of a neighborhood so tightly controlled must have appealed to homeowners fearing both. As indicated by the letters to the editor which *LIFE* received after printing “Hate and Greed on a Quiet Street”, its readers strove for stability among their neighbors.

The article was dominated by a large illustration demonstrating how many and varied the villages in this development would be – the names are not the official village names but serve illustrative purposes (Figures 4.9 and 4.10). These names include terms such as “Highbrow Haven”, which is supposed to appeal to the “contemplative intellectual” homeowner, while “Retirement Bay” offers “middle-income old folks [...] good views, gardening, and quiet without solitude” (“A Place for Every Taste – and Every Taste in Its Place” 123). “Tycoon Hill” and “Equestrian Estates” are supposed to appeal to the higher income homeowner, providing golf courses and a riding academy. This clustering of homeowners with the same general background and interests is reminiscent of the scene from *Revolutionary Road* I mentioned earlier in this chapter.

“A Way of Living”: Representations of Homeownership in *LIFE Magazine*

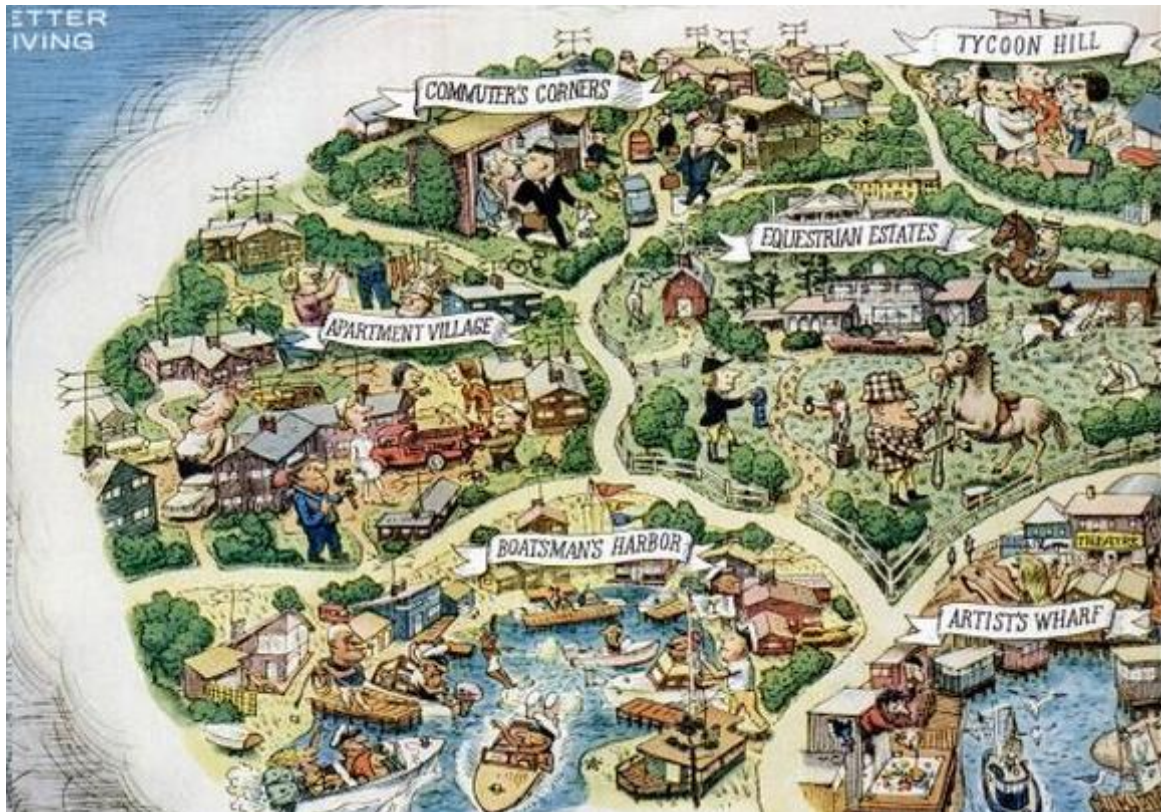


Figure 4.8 – The names given by LIFE editors for the planned developments suggest the kinds of homeowners desired to live in each respective development

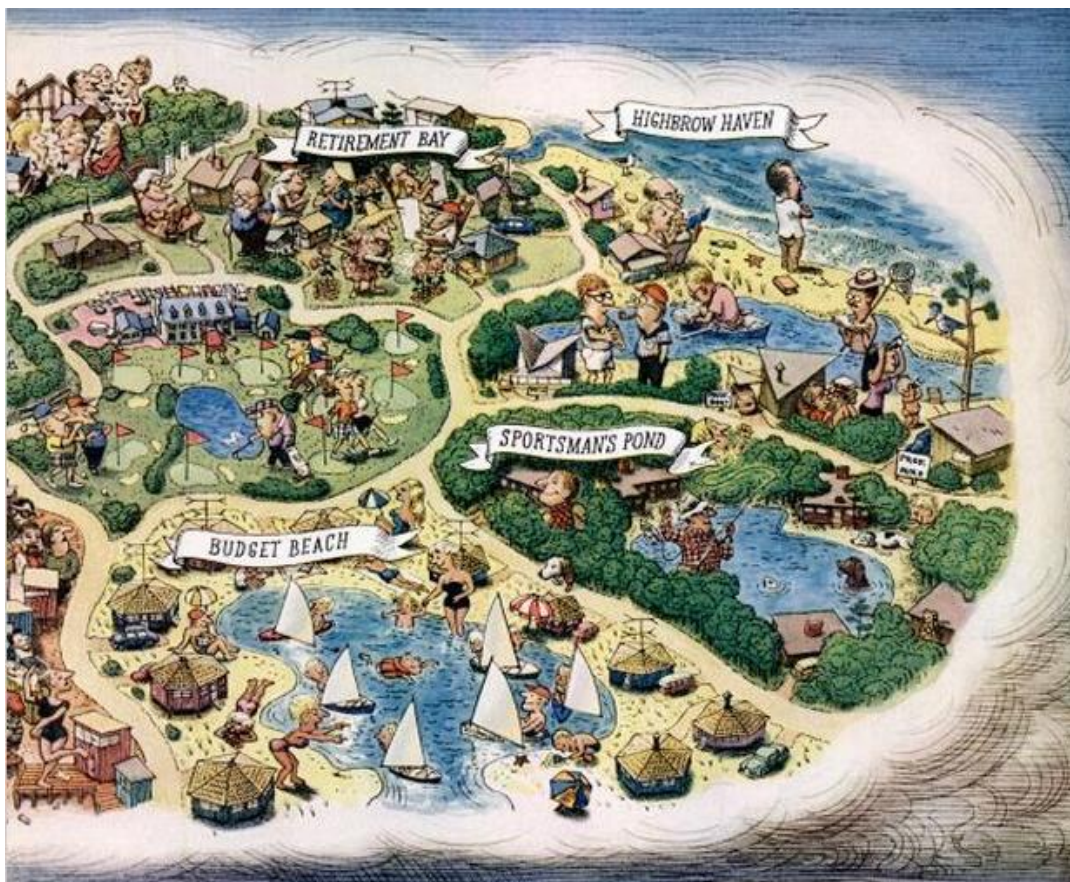


Figure 4.9 – Note the Retirement Bay: Here, too, elderly couples remain homeowners

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The imagery employed in the little sketches shown above is also noteworthy, for it seems to feed popular notions about the appearance and the kind of people who would live in each of these settlements. In the “Apartment Village” (Figure 4.9, to the left), featuring the only rental options, we see a man in his undershirt enjoying a cigar out on the street, while there is also a woman drying her laundry outside (possibly suggesting the lack of a high-price commodity such as a drier), and a man loading a pickup-truck. Women, too, are out and about, possibly on their way to work, which is very different from the scenes in “Commuter’s Corner”, located on the upper right side of “Apartment Village”. Here, the men are off to work, kissing their housewives dutifully goodbye. There is no laundry hung out to dry, and the area is altogether greener than the rental options. The homes in “Highbrow Haven” (Figure 4.10) are individualistic and incorporate modern shapes, suggesting a connection between educational levels and cultural affinity and one’s willingness to invest in bolder, modern architecture. Not a single person depicted in any of these neighborhoods is black.

As was the case with spacious homes in luxurious retirement communities, the majority of houses introduced in this article would not be affordable to the average American at the time. While supposedly designed for “middle-income, gregarious boatsmen and bathers” (“A Place for Every Taste – and Every Taste in Its Place” 123) homes in Sportsman’s Pond are priced between \$15,000-35,000, with only those priced up to \$20,000 truly affordable to the “middle-income groups” of the time whose incomes were defined between \$5,000 and \$9,999 per year (“Economic Behavior Revealed In Results of Survey Here”).

This focus on surrounding oneself with people who not only have the same general background but who also share one’s hobbies, is new to *LIFE*’s homeownership discourse. It may well have been a reaction to the fact that declining home values had weakened the general homeownership appeal in public opinion:

The topping out, and in many instances actual decline, in the selling price of single-family homes in recent years has lessened the ‘liquidity’ of this type of investment. With reduced prospects of realizing a ‘profit’ on the resale of a house, the appeal of homeownership has weakened. (“Apartment Boom Seen in Midwest”)

As home values were no longer expected to rise steadily throughout coming years, new arguments were advanced by builders to promote certain neighborhoods. The development

introduced by *LIFE* went along the same line, and it fit in with the magazine’s general attitude which suggested that homeownership not only gave one the freedom to choose a place to live but also to choose one’s neighbors.

Concluding Remarks

For years leading up to the 1960s, *LIFE* authors had been calling for lower house prices so as to make homeownership attainable to more people. This call had been silenced by the beginning of the 1960s, and while *LIFE*’s editors seem to have chosen to use low housing prices and cheap mortgages to encourage their readers to purchase a second home, developers, banks and loan agencies attempted to convince the public that homes – even though supply exceeded demand at the time – continued to be a good investment. In the advertisement below, the Pittsfield Cooperative Bank explained that “Home-Ownership is farsightedness ... the happier way of combining better living with sound property investment.” This advertisement seems to suggest that while prices were low and supply was ample in the small home field at the time, this was not bound to last – one farsighted individual would know this and buy immediately. The fact that prices were bound to go up again made this step a “sound property investment” (Figure 4.11)

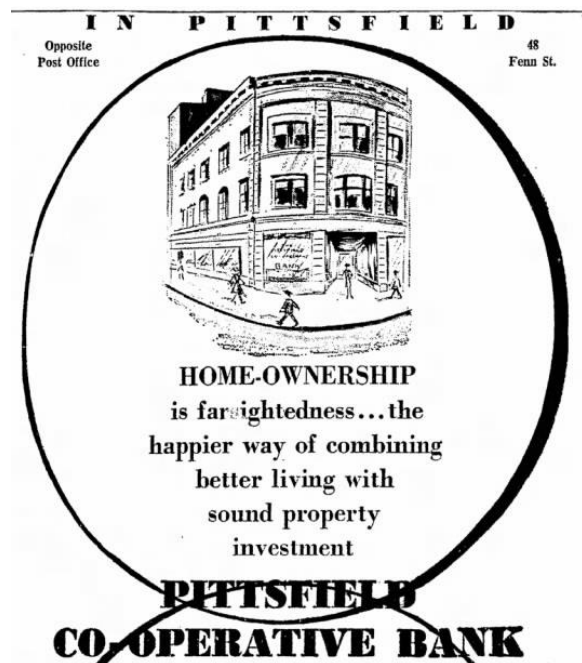


Figure 4.10: While housing prices are falling due to high supply and easy money, advertisements such as this strive to convince people that homeownership remained a sound investment.

By the end of 1960, it was reported that 61% of American households lived in their own homes and that this number was expected to be growing (Harlan Savings and Loan Grows 503% Since '50"). But homeownership was not the only thing on the rise. The amount

of money owed by American homeowners had also risen considerably (“Home-Ownership Gains”). In the 1950s, Americans had owed \$73 billion on their homes; by the beginning of 1960 this had reached \$106 billion (“Home-Ownership Gains”). According to a 1963 article from the *New York Times*, 57% of U.S. homes carried mortgages, with the average debt amounting to \$7,400 (“57% of U.S. Homes Carry Mortgages”) – practically a yearly income for an average household. In search of constant self-improvement the average American family bought a new home every seven years, which in turn meant that very few homeowners actually ever owned their homes free and clear (Dobler). Homeownership had come to rest “upon a vast empire of paper assets and financial expectations even in the very highest income brackets” (Dobler). New mortgage conditions also allowed people to borrow money regardless of age, enabling the elderly to borrow money even if their life expectancy was shorter than the mortgage’s term: “It is the real estate itself which is the guarantee of security, not the individual” (Dobler).

It may well have been the case that one’s like-mindedness with one’s neighbors drove homeowners’ consumption habits further. With incomes “fairly equal” in most suburbs, “social status and prestige were communicated by *possessions*. Possessions, the most public of which were your house exterior and car, told the rest of the world who you were or, at least, how you wanted to be seen” (Whiteley 6). Consequently, homeowners felt increasingly pressured into displaying their possessions. Advertisements of the time picked up on this. This is illustrated particularly well by a 1960 advertisement found in *LIFE* (Figure 4.12). Printed in the September 19, 1960 issue, it served to advertise the credit services of *The Commercial Banks of the U.S.* The term “credit” is never used; instead, the text talks about “sound financial planning” and “ways to make your money do more – go farther”. The advertisement explicitly tells readers that by taking advantage of this possibility, one can build “character, reputation – your ‘standing’ in the community”, thereby linking the amount of visible expenditures one can make with the ways one is viewed by one’s neighbors.



How do some families get so very money-wise?

Do they do more with their money than you do with yours?

Maybe it's the family down the street . . .
You're pretty sure that they don't make any more money than you do, yet *they* always seem to be the ones who take the trips . . . refurnish the living room . . . buy the new car . . . build the addition to the house.

How does it happen? How do some families get so very money-wise? One reason could be the way they *handle* it . . .

You see, handling money properly is like doing anything else properly. It takes some learning, some practice, some skill.

Behind most money-wise families, stands a full-service commercial Bank. A Bank that's ready and able to help in all matters of sound financial planning . . . and experienced in all the ways of making your money do more—go farther.

Perhaps best of all, when you work with a full-service Bank, you build character, reputation—your “standing” in your community.

This record of personal responsibility is a pretty wonderful thing to have . . . wherever you live and whatever you do.

WHAT IS A FULL-SERVICE BANK? It's simply a complete Bank, a *commercial* Bank. For unlike many financial institutions that offer only limited services, a full-service commercial Bank handles *all* your money needs. These services include:

- Savings Accounts
- Checking Accounts
- Personal Loans
- Car Loans
- Home Loans
- Business and Farm Loans

By using these services you build your Personal Standing in your community. Look for a full-service commercial Bank in your neighborhood.

*The Commercial Banks
of the U. S.*

Member Institution of Commercial Banks
Promoting U. S. BUYERS



Figure 4.11: This advertisement for The Commercial Banks of the U.S., epitomizes “Keeping up with the Joneses”.

The rise in mortgage availability also led to a rise in foreclosures, as growing numbers of people falsely believed that homeownership really was affordable to all as they lacked a real understanding of the true cost of homeownership (“Cost of a House is Often Illusive”). By 1962, one article observed, “[w]hile the rate of foreclosure is still far below the alarming level, there is no denying that the rate is rising” (Porter). The amount of foreclosures in the first quarter of 1962 lay approximately 25% above that of the previous year (Porter). The number of foreclosures in 1962 was the highest since the end of the Great Depression, and in addition to foreclosures a trend of “walkaways” developed. Low down payments (\$450 for a \$15,000 house) and low monthly payments which were little more than the interest on the mortgage, caused equity to build up extremely slowly. As a result, these homeowners had “virtually nothing invested in their houses” (“Many Homes Lost by Foreclosure”). Once they fell behind on their mortgage payments, they decided against attempting to sell the house in

question and rather “drop the keys in the mailbox or on the back steps, hire a moving van and pull out” (“Many Homes Lost by Foreclosure”). While exact numbers of such walkaways cannot be found, “[by] all accounts there were more than ever before” in 1962, occurring particularly often in Florida and Texas due to high numbers of new housing developments and a subsequent oversupply of homes (“Many Homes Lost By Foreclosure”).

Such homeowners did not make it into *LIFE*. The homeowners introduced within the magazine’s articles actually fit essayist John Keats’ cynical 1956 description of Levittowns and comparable suburban developments: “You can be certain all other houses will be precisely like yours, inhabited by people whose age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversation, dress, possessions, and perhaps even blood type are also precisely like yours” (quoted in Bressler). While Keats perceived this identicalness among neighbors as a bad thing, *LIFE* presented it positively. This is illustrated by its advice to homeowners looking to buy into a retirement community: “Make sure that you at least stand a chance on getting on with your neighbors – that others in the community have the same general background and interests you do” (“Widening World of Retirement Towns” 102). The message is clear: living alongside people with whom you do not share a general background and interests is likely to lead to intra-neighborhood conflict. While no explicit mention is made of skin color, readers of the time may well perceive it as being implied that sharing the same “general background” includes sharing the skin color.

Chapter 5: A “Castle in the Woods” and a “Fortress by the Sea” – Seclusion, Nature and Homeownership (1965-1972)

The 1960s marked one of the most prolonged periods of uninterrupted economic growth in the United States – eventually halted by a recession in 1969/70 (Raeithel, III 401-420). However, despite this economic success, the 1960s were a restless period – particularly in its second half. The Vietnam War, which had begun in 1961, escalated beginning in 1965, with public opposition to the war effort growing ever more pronounced. Yet, while large portions of the population – particularly those of college age - were partaking in demonstrations and protests, others watched them with disdain. Nationwide polls found that by 1967, “four out of ten Americans doubted the right of persons to protest peacefully and seven out of ten construed demonstrations as ‘acts of disloyalty’” (Ehrlich 303).

Demonstrations not only focused on Vietnam, but on other aspects of U.S. society as well. The women’s liberation movement was organized in the late 1960s, initiated in part by the publication of Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 in which the author dispelled the myth of the happy and satisfied American housewife. The Civil Rights Movement also continued to grow stronger, aided by Martin Luther King’s receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, which made a wider world public aware of African Americans’ struggle for equality. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which was intended to prevent racial discrimination in the voting process. Yet the struggle for integrated housing continued and was not easily, nor fully, resolved.

As in previous years, *LIFE*’s articles did not address discrimination in housing. Its portrayals of homeowners continued to feature white and middle class Americans. One particular change was noteworthy, however. *LIFE* began to publish articles about homes that were located within cities instead of the suburbs. These homes were not only especially expensive; they also reflected *LIFE*’s call of previous years to design homes to fit one’s individual needs.

The upscale urban homes depicted in *LIFE*’s articles of this period were not “typical” examples of city housing, especially considering the widespread concern in the 1960s about the development of slums in American cities and the need for urban renewal. Poverty of the period was perceived as being “confined, limited, isolated and oftentimes hidden [...] it is locked up in the inner-city neighborhoods” (George, 1968, 1194), and the programs initiated throughout the nation “did not curb the exodus of middle-class whites to the suburbs nor lure many of them back into the city” (George, 1968, 1195).

In addition to a new focus on city homes, *LIFE* in the late 1960s featured a considerable number of homes that were located well outside of traditional suburbs and cities and were constructed in ways that let their inhabitants interact with their natural surroundings.⁶¹ These home designs were not based on new ideas; their origins can be traced back to Frank Lloyd Wright who had passed away in 1959. As early as 1932, he had introduced homes connected with nature in his book *The Disappearing City*: “A building appears as of the landscape; and the human life living in it is less separate from nature than ever before. The hard and fast lines between outside and inside disappear” (quoted in Modisette 257). Wright reiterated these ideas and expanded on them in his 1958 book *The Living City*: “Great architects will surely then develop creative buildings [...] in harmony with greenery and ground” (quoted in Fishman 43).

While these ideas were not new in the 1960s, it was now that *LIFE* began introducing readers to homes that seemed to “appear as of the landscape” as called for by Wright decades earlier. One reason for this could have been the fact that environmentalism was on the rise after having emerged in the early 1960s (Luke 60). The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, a scientific critique of companies’ misuse of persistent chemical pesticides without knowing the full extent of their potential harm to the surrounding flora and fauna, had brought attention to humans’ impact on the environment. Referred to by contemporary critics as the most influential (and contentious) book since *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it caused an increase in people’s concern for the environment. A one-hour special on *CBS Reports* entitled “The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson” was broadcast in April, 1963, reaching 10 to 15 million viewers and sparking a second wave of outrage (Hazlett 704). Interest in Carson’s book and reactions to it primarily “came from a broad base among middle class (or at least middle-class identified) Americans” (Hazlett 705) – making the topic interesting to *LIFE*’s readership.⁶²

Overall, the concept of “Environmentalism” which referred to “the concern for the reciprocal impact of humans and nature” would be established as a “mainstream idea” during the 1970s (Menon & Menon 52). But the 1960s already saw a considerable increase in

⁶¹ “Nature” and “natural surroundings” in this context do not refer “true” nature but rather the “tamed” version found near human habitation.

⁶² As a matter of fact, *LIFE* repeatedly referenced Carson, and in its issue from October 12, 1962, it included a portrait on her entitled “The Gentle Storm Center”. Overall, the portrait was rather favorable, referring to Ms. Carson as “a shy, soft-spoken woman miscast in the role of crusader [...] unmarried but not a feminist” (105). This description stands in stark contrast to critical depictions of Rachel Carson which generally typecast her as “hysterical”: “A review in *Time* accused Carson of using “emotion-fanning words,” making a case that was “unfair, one-sided, and hysterically overemphatic,” an “emotional and inaccurate outburst,” based on her “mystical attachment to the balance of nature.”²⁹ Pro-pesticide forces portrayed Carson supporters through negative gender stereotypes as well, such as shrill, irrational housewives” (Hazlett 706).

people’s concern and interest with nature. This is evidenced not only by the profound interest the public took in Carson’s work but also by the success of a campaign led by the Sierra Club and others which culminated in the passing of the *Wilderness Act* in 1964. This act was created to make designated national forests and parks available for recreation while also preserving them for posterity.⁶³ Between 1960 and 1965, the number of people visiting national parks and forests increased fivefold to 3.5 million visitors per year (Turner 479).

LIFE, which ceased publication as a weekly magazine in 1972, remained influential throughout the late 1960s, serving “a diversity of audiences and several ideological, cultural, and generational subcultures within its predominantly white middle-class readership” (Gennari 262). And yet, the fracturing of American society occurred not only along class or ethnic lines but also within the white middle class. This segment of American society had never been as homogeneous and united as generally portrayed by *LIFE*, but the widening disparities among members of the middle class posed “a severe challenge to *Life*” (Gennari 262). In 1966, the magazine had achieved its highest ever yearly profit, grossing \$10 million. Over its last four years of publication from 1968 to 1972 it lost \$40 million (Gennari 274) and by 1972, “*Life* no longer knew who it was trying to flatter [...] with America at war with itself, it became impossible for *Life* any longer to project a clear, unambiguous, and consensual vision of American life” (Gennari 276). Just as it had simplified the American middle class in previous decades, it simplified American society, striving to bridge “the two Americas” of the 1960s, but “the notion that there were *only* two Americas helped to seal the magazine’s fate” (Gennari 266).

With regard to homeownership, these “two Americas” projected in *LIFE* were more wealthy than those that had been included on the magazine’s pages before and they were broadly divided into two categories: homeowners intent on living within nature and homeowners reclaiming the cities. There was no longer a focus on suburban homeownership within the magazine. This chapter not only discusses the ways in which *LIFE* celebrated home designs that were more expensive, elaborate and remote than ever before; it will also examine

⁶³ The contradiction inherent in the approach to make “wilderness” available for recreational purposes while “preserving” it at the same time, was an issue hotly debated surrounding the *Wilderness Act*: “Richard Costley, who oversaw the Forest Service’s wilderness program, called this the ‘basic riddle inherent’ in wilderness. Solving this riddle saddled the Forest Service with difficult decisions. Restrictions on wilderness recreation threatened the freedom long associated with wilderness travel; unlimited recreation itself could permanently alter the ecology of wilderness areas; and simply putting wilderness behind legislative boundaries threatened to tame it, diminishing the wildness that the act originally aimed to preserve. Ultimately, Costley explained, wilderness could not be all things to all people. ‘We’ve got to make the point... forcefully that the ‘recreational values’ are not the only values in wilderness. After all, wilderness areas were set aside to protect them—even from recreationists.’” (Turner 469)

the continued quest for minority homeownership which did not make its way into *LIFE* but played a considerable role in the overall discourse of the time. *LIFE*'s homeownership representations in those years were dominated by the series “Ideas in Houses” which might partially remind the reader of the post-war “LIFE Presents....”-Series (discussed in chapter 2). The striking difference from that series is the utter disregard for affordability within “Ideas in Houses”.

The continued quest for minority homeownership

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the civil rights movement achieved a variety of important successes in the early 1960s with the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Still, white America remained hesitant to open housing to African Americans and President Lyndon B. Johnson reverted to remarkable arguments to push through open housing legislation. During a news conference in August, 1966, he told a story of a recent drive through Denver:

You drove through the places where you would expect to see the ghettos in Denver and you saw modest homes. I said to some of my people that it looked very much like my mother's home in Austin, Texas [...] It would have been difficult to believe that those were Negro homes, if you hadn't seen them standing there [...] They had no problem with outsiders coming in and staging big marches and pickets with signs. Some people just felt Denver had to have one. So, some of them came in and urged one. They said it was the biggest flop of the year because these people have their homes and they are happy.

This quote is particularly interesting because it suggests that homeownership promotes a kind of *passive* citizenship, while homeownership throughout the decades had traditionally been associated with *active* citizenship. When viewed in the context of the Black Power Movement which gained national attention in 1966, Johnson may well be suggesting that if African Americans are enabled to become homeowners, they can be quieted down.⁶⁴ What a contrast

⁶⁴ Stokely Carmichael had “unleashed the ‘Black Power’ slogan in the midst of a civil rights march in Greenwood, Mississippi, on June 16, 1966” (Joseph 9). However, it should be noted that the Black Power Movement took root much earlier (and indeed followed a much broader agenda than the inherent nationalism and “racism in reverse” that many white contemporaries ascribed to it and which they blamed for creating a white backlash and hindering the civil rights process (as illustrated, for example, in “Black Power is Black Death”). For a brief yet informative overview covering the roots of Black Power and acknowledging its political and intellectual aspects, see Joseph's “Historians and the Black Power Movement”.

to the yeoman farmer who was considered to take an *active* part in a society in which he had a stake (De Neufville & Barton 186).

It is also important to note that Johnson was by no means talking about black homeownership in mixed suburbs but instead referred to places “where you would expect to see ghettos”, meaning the inner cities. This implies that a separation of homeowners based on skin color is thought to continue with whites living in the suburbs and African Americans residing in their own homes in the inner cities. Just how difficult it was to fully integrate suburbs is further illustrated by some of the legislative measures passed in this respect by counties throughout the nation. In 1967, Montgomery County in Maryland passed an open housing ordinance, but tied it to very particular quotas: while “otherwise all-inclusive, with no significant loopholes”, these quotas were supposed to “suspend operation of the antidiscrimination law when the Negro population of apartment buildings or residential neighborhoods in the county reaches a sizable proportion” of anywhere between 10 and 30%. Those in favor of these quotas argued that it would prevent the “‘inundation’ by Negroes and consequent ‘re-segregation of small areas of the county’” (Franklin).

In other counties, politicians also were hesitant to really push for decisive open housing legislation, as they felt that the “white backlash vote [...] is becoming a gut issue in many communities” (“Dirty Politics and ‘Backlash’”). California governor Pat Brown “felt obliged to moderate his support of open housing in California” because pollsters estimated that white backlash could decide the fate of 20 out of 45 legislative seats (“Dirty Politics and ‘Backlash’”). The fact that a purely hypothetical risk of angering a number of racist voters was considered substantial enough to endanger election results illustrates that racism was still believed to be widespread enough to alter politicians’ actions.

While Brown feared the loss of elections due to racist sentiments, the case of Democrat George P. Mahoney illustrates that these fears may well have been unfounded. Mahoney ran for governor of Maryland in 1966 on the slogan “Your Home is Your Castle; Protect It”. Throughout his campaign, Mahoney claimed “Attempts are being made right now to destroy that time-honored principle – a man’s home is his castle [...] George P. Mahoney alone consistently has been, and still is, pledged to veto any Senate bill which denies the home owner the right to sell or rent as he chooses” (Figure 5.1).

**YOUR home
is YOUR
castle...
keep it that way!**



“Maryland’s #1 Democrat”

MAHONEY PLEDGES YOU

ON OPEN-HOUSING: Attempts are being made right now to destroy that time-honored principle—a man’s home is his castle. One candidate is for the stiffest possible open-housing law. Another vacillates from one extreme to another. Don’t be fooled. George P. Mahoney alone consistently has been, and still is, pledged to veto any State bill which denies the home owner the right to sell or rent as he chooses.

ON TAXES . . . an end to the waste and extravagance which are making your taxes go sky-high!

ON TRANSIT . . . public ownership of metropolitan area transit companies! Development of a real rapid transit system.

ON CONFLICT OF INTEREST . . . no employee of the State should be allowed to profit because of that employment . . . and I will enforce it!

ON HIGHWAY SAFETY . . . stop the slaughter on our highways — more traffic control and enforcement!

ON CRIME . . . make it possible for young people to become “good guys” instead of potential criminals.

ON ROADS . . . stop wasting money by bad planning — we can save millions every year by using our imagination!

ON EDUCATION . . . raise teacher pay; more vocational schools and junior colleges; more teacher’s colleges.

ON WATER POLLUTION . . . meet with scientists and industry to control further pollution and reduce present pollution.

Figure 5.1 – Advertisement for Democratic gubernational contender George P. Mahoney who opposed Open Housing legislation. His claim “Your home is your castle” is to be understood in an anti-desegregationist way; Mahoney opposed opening white suburbs to African American homeowners.

While Mahoney’s segregationist, anti-open-housing stance did not win him the governorship, his nomination as his party’s candidate further underscores how politicians continued to set store by the opinion of segregationists. Other populists employed similar rhetoric to that of Mahoney and suggested in their speeches that open housing legislation violated American homeowners’ freedoms; for example, in 1964, Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater criticized Johnson’s call for integrated housing because it supposedly required “integration into private affairs” (Times Wire Service).

In Pittsburgh, a group of African American homeowners protested against a planned public housing project near their homes (valued between \$18,000 and \$30,000). The article quoted a black homeowner: “We never would have built there if we knew this was going to happen. We’ve poured out life savings into our home and now you’re going to ruin it”, and another said: “You can’t expect a man paying as little as \$35 a month to take care of a place

like a property-owner does. He just doesn't care” (“Negro Homeowners Fight Public Housing Project; Oppose Colored Neighbors”). Note how the headline is at odds with what the men are truly saying; they are opposed to low-rent housing near their homes because supposedly tenants do not take care of their apartments. This is an argument that had been brought forward in past decades by white homeowners with regard to white public housing tenants again and again. Regardless of race, homeowners were opposed to the presence of poor tenants in their neighborhood for fear of adverse effects upon their real estate values. However, the headline claims that the men “oppose colored neighbors” as opposed to low-income tenants – a white homeowner who was against integrated neighborhoods, would feel validated in his opinion – if blacks themselves do not want to live next to other blacks, why should he? This article also further proves a point made earlier in chapter 3: class divisions among African Americans were hardly recognized by white media and the fact that there was an African American middle class that shared the white middle class antipathy against low income housing in the vicinity of their own homes was not seen as a valid point.

In the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1965, title VIII of which is referred to as the Fair Housing Act. It had failed to pass numerous times before. The watered down version which was finally passed and went into effect January 1, 1969, provided that almost all multi-family apartment buildings and all homes sold by developers became subject to anti-discrimination provisions of the Civil Rights Act (“Open Housing Law in Effect on January 1”). However, not all housing was subject to the Act. Multi-family apartment buildings excluded from the statute were duplexes, rooming houses and apartments of four or fewer units to a building (“Open Housing, Street Widening Are Highlights”). By excluding these buildings as well as privately owned and sold single family dwellings, some people could still allow racism to influence their decisions about to whom they would sell their houses.

It comes as little surprise, then, that the Fair Housing Act failed to eliminate racism in the housing market. Fair Housing Committees remained active to support African Americans looking to become homeowners. In 1972, *The New York Times* ran an article pointing out that the Fair Housing Committee of Ridgewood, Glen Rock and the vicinity (New Jersey) “is still quietly struggling to help black families buy or rent homes in this overwhelmingly white, middle-class end of Bergen county” (“Blacks Get Help in Hunt for Homes in Bergen”). The Committee sent out white members to collect evidence against landlords and real-estate agents suspected of not adhering to the nondiscriminatory laws and also provided white

escorts for prospective black homeowners “who are hesitant to approach a broker’s office alone” (“Blacks Get Help in Hunt for Homes in Bergen”). Furthermore, it provided African Americans with its own listings of homes for sale in the area. Despite these efforts, more often than not, efforts were unsuccessful.⁶⁵

“Ideas in Houses”

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, *LIFE* featured homes that were more individualistic and more expensive than the ones it had featured before. In January, 1965, it kicked off its series “Ideas in Houses”, promising readers: “Some of these houses will be beyond the average pocketbook and others well within it. All of them will help you to think of the house you live in now in a new light or bring you fresh, exciting concepts for the house you may one day own” (“Ideas in Houses” 85). As a matter of fact, all of these houses (with the exception of some vacation cabins), were well out of “the average pocketbook”.

The first part of the series featured “A Castle in The Woods”, selling for \$40,000. Considering the average income of \$7,700 of American families at the time, homes selling for \$19,250 would be affordable to them (when adhering to the recommendation of purchasing a home priced at not more than 2.5 times the annual income). The husband, Ray Crites, is a successful architect, which represents yet another departure from previous homeownership representations of *LIFE*. In the preceding decades, *LIFE* homeowners had held “regular” office jobs that a large portion of readers could easily identify with. The household heads in “Ideas in Houses” generally held jobs as exotic as their homes. What remains unchanged are the wives’ roles within the household: housewife and mother. Possibly in an effort to demonstrate that the home may look unconventional but that it fulfills its primary functions, the article’s author points to Crites’ wife: “she is delighted at the housewifely help the trees give her. Against the pattern of the leaves and branches, dirt is hardly noticeable on the windows and she rarely has to wash them”, and her only complaint is the missing laundry chute: “it’s a long way from the third floor to the basement”, which further emphasizes the sheer size of the home (“A Castle in The Woods” 91).

⁶⁵ In addition to still operating Fair Housing Councils and court rulings to enforce open housing, the fact that this topic remained an issue is also underscored by the reinterpretation of the play “Raisin in the Sun”, which reopened on Broadway in form of a musical. The play, which had premiered in 1959 as the first Broadway play by an African American playwright, featured open housing as its central theme: a black family has bought a home in a white neighborhood and is faced with bribes and implied threats by its white neighbors who want the family out of the area. The play’s title is inspired by a poem by Langston Hughes: “What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore, And the run? ... Or does it explode?” (Baldwin). The fact that this play was adapted into a musical in 1973 indicates that the problems facing the family, were still pertinent to contemporaries of the early 1970s - regardless of open housing legislation.

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While the article reflects traditional notions of gender roles, the home in question is anything but traditional (Figure 5.2). Instead of being located within a suburban development with well-manicured lawns, it is situated in a wooded area. Although no neighbors are anywhere close, the home is constructed in such a way as to shield its inhabitants from prying eyes making it easily discernible why *LIFE*'s editors chose to refer to it as a “castle”. While this can be seen as a play on the saying “my home is my castle”, it is also likely that homes chosen to represent homeownership within *LIFE* throughout these years were often chosen based on their appearance of providing their inhabitants with seclusion and protection from the societal strife on the outside. The home shown in Figure 5.3, which I will discuss below, is a further example for this.



Figure 5.2 – The „Castle in The Woods“ may not be a traditional suburban home, but the family members’ roles certainly are

A focus on traditional gender roles is very much present in the vast majority of articles belonging to the “Ideas in Houses”-series. In another installment of the series from March,

1965, the author suggests that the homeowner’s wife’s sole demands for their home were: “The house must be easy to clean, spacious enough to keep her family of nine from getting in each other’s way, and have ‘oodles and oodles of storage space’” (“Patio Life Behind Walls” 93). Particularly the references made to the home’s size and the storage space emphasize the family’s wealth as well another defining characteristic which *LIFE* homeowners had been exhibiting for decades by this point: consumerism. Beginning with the storage walls introduced in the 1940s (see chapter 3), *LIFE* authors had repeatedly pointed to storage possibilities to be found in owned homes (no such reference was ever made in rented homes, unless it was to point out the absence thereof). The reference to the storage space was not the only suggestion of wealth (and a considerable consumption habit). The wife was also quoted as saying: “I was lucky, because I could buy everything new for this house. We practically brought only our clothes and husband’s sailing trophies with us” (“Patio Life behind Walls” 97). This statement, in combination with the demand for lots of storage space underscores the family’s wealth, allowing them to not only finance a new home but also a complete set of new furniture as well as continuing to buy more things unnecessary for everyday life and therefore stored away most of the time.

This home may not be as striking from the outside as the “Castle in the Woods” but its location certainly is. Unlike the vast majority of homes *LIFE* introduced its readers to throughout the decades before, this home was neither located in a suburb nor in a rural setting. Instead, it was an urban home, situated in the French Quarter in the middle of New Orleans. This might explain the fact that the home is closely surrounded by walls, shielding from glances of passersby four different patios and living areas construed from steel and glass (Figure 5.3). The message conveyed here seems clear: one can live the good, home-owning life in the city, but one needs to be prepared (and able to afford) to fence it off from the city streets to ensure privacy.

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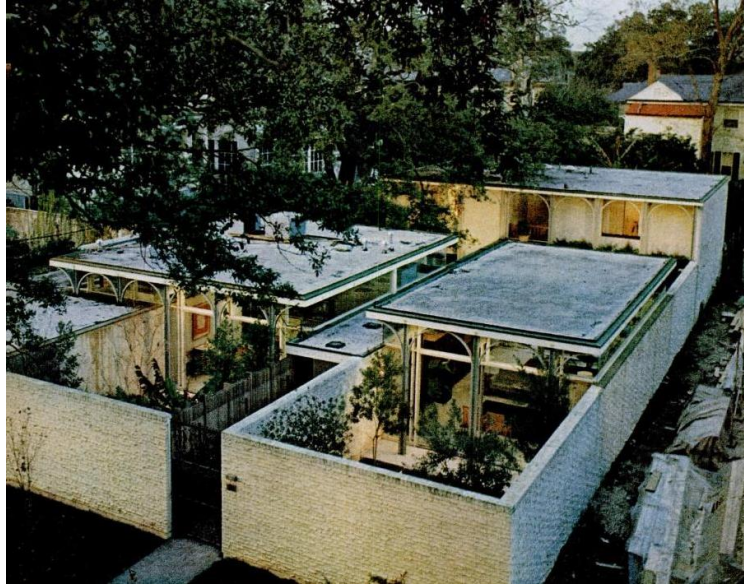


Figure 5.3: The house features four patios and a garden; all fenced off from the city streets by a brick wall. While the house is much less remote than the “Castle in the Woods” this wall still ensures highest degrees of privacy.

Many of the homes introduced in “Ideas in Houses” have a guarded, walled-in feeling, even when they are not situated on narrow city lots. This is underscored by two other homes introduced in the series, both of which are located on the ocean. One of those, introduced in April, 1965 (“A Bold Splash”), is a Californian home, owned by Bill and Glenn Cooper. While this home features deck space visible (but not accessible) from the beach, it is removed from neighboring homes, and its enclosed center courtyard is protected by the house itself from curious glances (Figure 5.4).

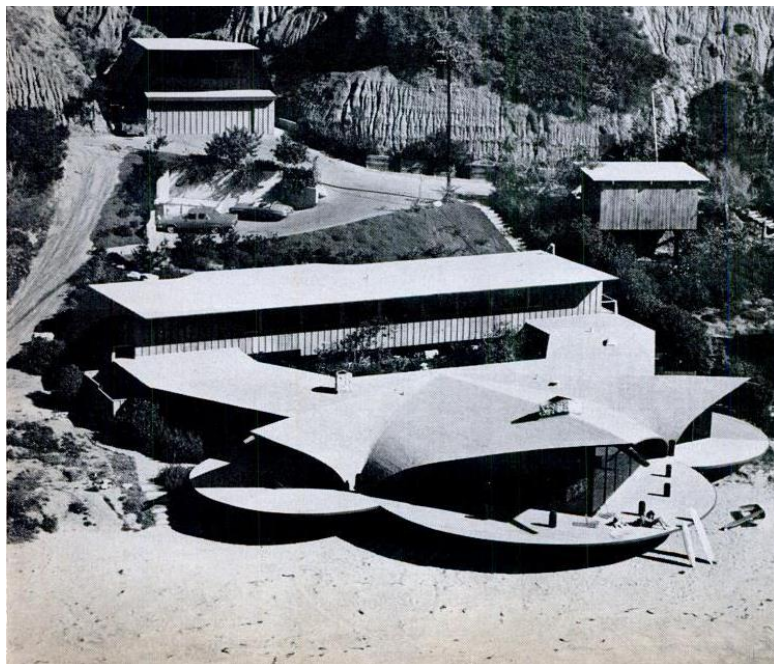


Figure 5.4 – While the deck space of the Cooper home is visible from the beach, the outdrawn roof and seclusion of the inner court make for very private living.

Unlike previously featured homeowners, *LIFE*'s homeowners of the late 1960s have expensive and unusual hobbies. Instead of simply going to the beach or going fishing in the mountains, they spend their leisure time in other ways: Mr. Cooper, for example, enjoys racing cars (an expensive hobby, indicating the high income of the household). The combination of extraordinary hobbies as well as rare professions further removes these homeowners from the “average”. Previous homeowners, such as Mr. Frech (chapter 3) were also by no means “average” but their lifestyles could be emulated by a large portion of *LIFE* readers based on their education and professional level. The Coopers' lifestyle is so far out of the ordinary that it is hard to emulate even for the “above national average” average *LIFE* reader. This not only holds true for the male heads of household, but also often for their wives. Mrs. Cooper, for example, is “a civic leader and 1965 Woman of the Year in Los Angeles” (“A Bold Splash” 91). The family's five children are most often watched over by Alberta, “the pearl of all maids, who is in the house *all* the time” (“A Bold Splash” 91). Despite this obvious disconnect between the Coopers and *LIFE* readers, the magazine's editors seem to have attempted to bridge the gap between the two. *LIFE*'s piece on the Coopers and their home addresses the “average” *LIFE* reader (who, as pointed out before, is by no means the “average American”) by suggesting that the Coopers' home's “colossal scale is impressive. Yet a house half the size and nowhere near an ocean can make sensible use of its dramatic ideas” (“A Bold Splash” 90-1). This statement can not only be read as a means in which *LIFE*'s editors strove to address their readership by suggesting that the homes featured in “Ideas in Houses” – however extravagant – could indeed serve as inspiration for them. It also acknowledges that seaside properties are generally not affordable to middle class homeowners – and yet, they are featured prominently within “Ideas in Houses”.

The second coastal home was featured in an issue from August, 1965, and its headline, “Fortress by the Sea”, implies that this is yet another secluded home with much privacy. This home is inhabited by the Bittenwiesers and their four children in the summer months – during the winter they live in their nine room apartment in Manhattan – a luxury not affordable by even the “upper middle class” and therefore a piece of information that clearly places the Bittenwiesers in the upper class. This impression is further underscored by the information that the Bittenwiesers have inherited wealth and do not rely on wealth they have accumulated within their own lifetimes. Thirty-three-year old Larry Bittenwieser did not finance the home all on his own. According to the article, he “had always dreamed of building a house and hoped to get around to it in his 40s. Two years ago his parents offered to build a house for

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them to use so that the whole family could be together during the summers” (“Fortress by the Sea” 88).

The home consists of three towers – one for the children, one for the adults, and one for kitchen and staff, which is once more an indication that the income range of this family is anything but middle class. However, as in the previous articles of the series, *LIFE* dedicates one sentence in this piece to assure readers that there is some wisdom to be found for them in the story: “The idea of a center area for family living, flanked by separate areas of privacy, is one that can easily be adapted to less overwhelming edifices” (82). Just like the previous homes, the Bittenwiesers’ house is imposing, fenced-off, and virtually impenetrable. This is not a house suitable for participatory neighborhood living, which is also suggested by the article’s headline, which refers to the home as a “fortress” (Figure 5.5).

These homes’ walled-in appearances, in combination with the authors’ focus on the traditional gender roles create the impression that these homeowners lives are far removed from the civic unrest and the doubts and conflicts present within U.S. society at the time. Their homes appear to provide not only privacy but rather “protection” from society’s worries and rapidly changing definitions of appropriate behavior for people of a certain age, race or gender. *LIFE*’s editors may have chosen to focus on these homes because they imply a certain safety from intrusion of any kind.



Figure 5.5 – The “Fortress by the Sea” is imposing and walled in, very much like the other homes introduced in *Ideas in Houses*.

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That these homes were not built for the average pocketbook (or an average family's needs) becomes clear even if an article does not feature the exact price of the house or the yearly income of its owners: for example, one family introduced entertains somewhere between 30 to 60 guests at home each week (“Stepped-Back Walls”, October 1965), while others took care to include a living room suitable for entertaining up to 250 guests at once (“In the Desert, a Hacienda for 1967”, February 1967).

Another article featuring a town home in Georgetown in Washington, D.C., mentions in passing that the homeowner Calvin Cafritz is “the son of the famous Washington hostess” therefore once more alluding to homeowners who probably inherited considerable portions of their wealth (“Thin Home in an Old Row” 89, November 1966), and a third piece explains that the owners bought the lot for their home “on an impulse”, implying that their financial reserves were sufficient enough that such a large expenditure did not require long-term and careful planning and consideration (“Up-To-Date Colonial” 122, November 1967). When prices are provided, they range from \$42,000 (“Round Home Moored to a Hill”, August 1966) to \$132,000 for a home whose owners had intended to spend no more than \$60,000 and who were quoted as saying: “We watched money flowing out like the tide” (“Palace on the Beach” 86, June 1967).

Previously, *LIFE* articles on homeowners and their homes had been focused on certain advantages to be found in these homes – for example, such modern amenities as washing machines and indirect lighting in the 1930s and early 1940s, and ample room for storage from the mid-1940s onwards. By the 1960s, the focus had shifted to feature much more elaborate home amenities such as room for entertaining large numbers of guests and the use of one's home as an outlet for very specialized needs and interests. The “Palace on the Beach”, briefly mentioned above, is one example illustrating that, by the mid-1960s, *LIFE*'s homeownership representations had left suburbia and the “typical” American home, along with its storage walls, far behind. This home was built by a “mogul” in the marketing business (a term indicating business success with the corresponding wealth as well as serving as an allusion to the house's Asian elements) who craved the “tranquility” of a beach house to which he and his wife escaped when life on Fifth Avenue became too hectic. This supposedly fulfilled “Western Man's quest for the perfect beach house” (“Palace on the Beach” 81). To refer to the search for a holiday home as “Western Man's quest” suggests that such a search may be a noble activity leading, if not to salvation as the quest for the Holy Grail may have brought, then at least to a state of happy tranquility, which may be the 20th century version of salvation.

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Furthermore, the author chose to refer to this process as “Western Man’s” quest. While this may easily have been invoked by the topic of a house inspired by Eastern traditions, it also implies that it is “the West” – along with capitalism – that provides its subjects with enough wealth to feel the need for such an undertaking. The author is also quick to point out that the home may look like a Japanese palace (Figure 5.6) but that it boasts Western comforts, beginning with its size: “The living room [...] is 24 by 24 feet, a space into which three or four rooms would be crowded in a comparable house in Japan” (“Palace on the Beach” 82). Once more this is an allusion to the perceived superiority of American comforts of living as opposed to those of other cultures.



Figure 5.6: LIFE deemed this Japanese-inspired construction to be the fulfillment of “Western Man’s quest for the perfect beach house”.

Finally, the author pays particular attention to the home’s connection with nature - the homeowner is quoted as saying “you get the feeling you’re more than just *next* to the ocean. You feel that you’re *part* of it” (“Palace on the Beach” 86). This sounds somewhat reminiscent of the owners of the Castle in the Woods who, according to the article, “live with the forest’s changing mood and seasons” (“Ideas in Houses” 87). This celebration of homes

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that allow their owners to live engulfed by nature is another clear departure from earlier homeownership projections found within *LIFE* – what a contrast to the carefully manicured lawns and overall controlled nature found in the suburbs celebrated on the magazine’s pages only a few years earlier.

Since appearances were no longer projected as a chief concern of a homeowner, *LIFE* also provided photo spreads including homes designed to suit unusual and idiosyncratic caprices of the featured owners. This is illustrated particularly well in “Villa with a Built-in Whimsy”, another part of *LIFE*’s “Ideas in Houses” series. The house featured in this article includes a spiral staircase built around an old redwood tree, a heated swimming pool, and even a built in cage for the family’s monkey and birds. Once again these homeowners were shown as living *with* nature.

In addition to colorful photographs, the article also provided a floor plan for its readers to illustrate just how unusual the overall conception of this home was (Figure 5.7). It is hard to imagine that suburban home plots would provide enough space, let alone privacy, to allow for such whimsies to be accommodated.

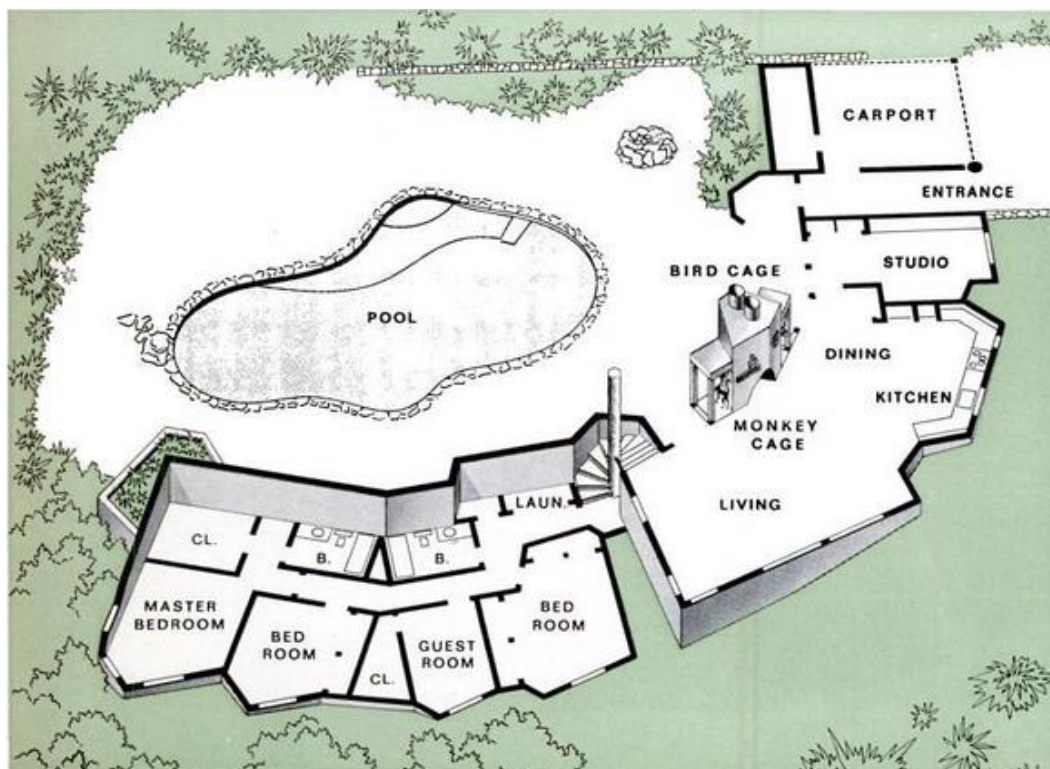


Figure 5.7: Floor Plan of the “Villa with a Built-in Whimsy” featuring an indoor monkey and bird cage

LIFE’s articles from the 1930s and 1940s had featured homeowners with whom readers might easily identify. They had common family names such as “Smith”, relatable

jobs, and family histories that were detailed enough to illustrate that they had climbed the social ladder and earned the right to a comfortable and homeownership life. The homeowners from “Ideas in Houses” no longer fit that description. They carried less common names, many were employed in creative professions, some had inherited wealth and some had hobbies, interests and pets that the majority of *LIFE* readers could hardly relate to. Homeowners in the “Ideas in Houses” series also tended to have significantly larger families than the average American household. While there a few exceptions to this, most of the families introduced had children – generally at least three, and up to five or seven, which was highly unusual, considering that the average household size had decreased to 3.19 by 1969 (“Average Family Size Decreases”). As mentioned, the families were generally also single-earner households, with the wives involved in charity work or enrolled in art history college classes, which is also indicative that these are by no means average families, in which two incomes were often required to finance middle class consumerist lifestyles: in 1968, one out of three married women held a job outside of the home, which was cited as one reason why increasing numbers of families attained annual incomes of \$10,000 (“Working Wives”). The only attempt to make these families relatable for the middle class reader were one-sentence hints that certain ideas could be adapted to a lower budget (as done, for example, in the piece “A Bold Splash” in which the reader is told that a house half this size and located somewhere other than the beach would be much more affordable).

Housing for the Poor

While “Ideas in Houses” was celebrating expensive avant-garde homes and the comfortable lives to be led in them, American policymakers once more engaged in heated debates on public housing options and solution to enable low-income households to become homeowners. Quite possibly in an effort to assure low-income white families that their plight was not forgotten amidst open housing debates, in May, 1967, Republicans in Congress proposed a “major new way to bring homeownership to the poor” (“Republicans Propose a Homeowner Plan”). The idea was to set up a National Homeownership Foundation which would borrow \$2 billion in loans from the private money market and relend the money to local nonprofits that, in turn, would use these funds for loans for the poor. Under this proposal, mortgages offered under this plan were to be limited to \$12,000-\$15,000 which was “not enough to build single-family homes in most cities where the urban poor are concentrated”, according to the Johnson administration, which was advocating its own plan to promote homeownership among the poor (“Republican Propose a Homeowner Plan”).

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The Democrats’ plan combined policies to increase homeownership opportunities with slum removal: “The program involves helping non-profit groups to buy and fix up rundown houses and then resell them to poor families with a 3 per cent mortgage” (“Pilot Poverty Plan Newest LBJ Scheme”). The Federal Housing Administration was to ensure 30 year mortgages and guarantee that the lender would receive his regular 6 per cent interest rate. According to President Johnson, this program would also improve the lot of low-income families that had managed to become homeowners on their own:

Some families with low but steady incomes have become the owners of decent, modest homes. Their well-maintained homes are often in the midst of slum areas. They are frequently surrounded by substandard homes owned by absentee landlords, where poor families pay rent in amounts much higher than would have been required for ownership of a modest home. (“Pilot Poverty Plan Newest LBJ Scheme”)

The bill that was eventually passed in August, 1968 as part of the bigger Housing Act, was somewhat of a compromise between both plans. The Act was the “most ambitious housing bill in the nation’s history”: its impact was predicted to be considerable with as much as \$5.3-billion set aside for the construction of around 1.7 million housing units over three years to come (Semple 1). In addition to providing 700,000 new dwelling units for low and moderate income renters, the bill’s section 235 also aimed at aiding 500,000 families to buy homes. To achieve homeownership under this plan, a family would have to dedicate 20% of its income to the monthly mortgage payment; the rest would be met by the program’s funding. This subsidy was not to exceed what it would cost if the interest rate was to be reduced to 1 per cent. Those families qualifying for assistance could purchase a home worth \$12,000 on a yearly income of as little as \$3,000, with the mortgage running for up to 40 years. Such spending power - to be able to buy a home worth 4 times one’s annual income - was a luxury not affordable to those seeking homeownership without public assistance. The media referred to those making use of section 235 as “235 homeowners”.

Reactions to the 235-program were mixed. For those on truly low incomes, the program was expensive despite the financial assistance provided: “Nearly all the women interviewed said that after utilities were paid and even with the low cost house payment, living in the homes is still expensive when compared to the salaries brought in” (“Title 235 Homes ‘No Real Bargain’”). Some newspapers reported complaints by 235 homeowners about poorly constructed homes. Yet, in many “Letters-to-the-editor”-sections, 235

homeowners wrote that they had no such complaints and were in fact very happy and satisfied with the homes themselves as well as repair services when needed. Rumors surrounding the program were prevalent, with angry non-235-homeowners writing in to newspapers and complaining about perceived special, and unjustified, treatments afforded to the 235ers. One particularly angry reader claimed to have heard that these homeowners, who paid only 1% of the 8% interest, could deduct 8% from their taxes – “what is the justification for allowing a ‘235’ homeowner to take credit for the interest paid for him by other United States taxpayers?” (“‘235’ Interest Money”). This rumor was unfounded, but it appeared in newspapers across the nation, and it seemed to persist even though editors were generally replying to these letters and explaining that this was not the case.

It must be noted that both Democrats and Republicans had been calling for this housing program. Indeed, according to a White House aide “it is conceded that the vigorous advocacy by [Republican] Senator Charles H. Percy [...] of home ownership for the poor forced the Administration to come up with a plan of its own” (Semple 12). This statement deserves attention: particularly in the years leading up to this point, public housing programs had been shunned as too socialistic and while such programs continued on a small scale (and without much fanfare), since the time of the Eisenhower administration, they were not popular among politicians. So how did this sudden bipartisan interest come about? One reason for this may have been the desire to calm down the unrest that permeated American society throughout the 1960s. President Johnson’s assessment quoted above, that black homeowners were less likely to engage in demonstrations than black tenants, that homeownership fostered a sort of *passive* (in the sense of “peaceful”) citizenship. Johnson reiterated that sentiment with regards to Americans in general, regardless of skin color, a few months after the public housing bill passed. At the dedication of a public housing project on December 14, 1968 he stated:

In 1938, under President Roosevelt’s administration, we rolled up our sleeves and pledged our people that we were going to remake America by trying to make available to every family a house that they could own, and what a wonderful goal that was, and what a wonderful achievement it could have been [...] We started here and we have failed. Because we have failed we have all the restlessness and the disorder in the cities. (Johnson, 1968)

According to the logic Johnson employs here, the root cause for America’s current problems is a lack in homeownership. Yet it should be noted that it was not the expressed goal of the

Roosevelt administration to turn every American into a homeowner. While emphasizing that those who were already homeowners needed support to remain homeowners in order to save the U.S.-economy at the time, Roosevelt never explicitly called for homeownership for all (Eisenhower was the first U.S. president to do so). By drawing parallels between his own administration and that of FDR, Johnson also implied that the civil unrest in the 1960s was a challenge comparable to the Great Depression. Considering that the United States had entered a time of growing prosperity after the Depression, Johnson may have invoked the image so as to assure the public that this time of unrest will pass and turn into prosperity as had been the case with the end of the Great Depression.

But while Johnson referred back to the times of FDR, *LIFE*, in the 1960s, did not publish articles about government housing programs, as it had done during the Roosevelt administration. *LIFE* in 1937 had been critical of government programs such as the Greenbelt development as being an inadequate solution for the country’s housing shortage and had advocated private sector housing construction as an alternative. Even though the 235ers were featured throughout American media at the time, and even though it was a bipartisan discussion, the issue did not find its way into *LIFE*’s articles about homeownership – possibly because the magazine was striving harder than before to cater to a more elite readership.

High Taxes and the Economic Downturn of the 1970s: Homeowners Reach Financial Limits

While omitting public homeownership programs, the magazine did feature homeowners who struggled financially, although not so seriously as to lose their homes. The challenges faced by American society did not come to an end with the enactment of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968 and other Great Society legislation. To the contrary: financial throes were added to societal challenges. While *LIFE*’s articles featured homes, money was becoming in short supply for middle class Americans, particularly as the 1960s were coming to a close. In 1965, the Federal Reserve Board had raised interest rates to stem inflation (“Mortgage Interest Seen Minor Issue with Homeowner”). As a result, money for lending became scarcer, and by 1966, sparse credit resources caused lenders to require down payments on houses as high as 20 or 30 per cent (while it had been 10 per cent in preceding decades). Interest rates were also on the rise. People complained about “historically high interest rates and [...] the tightest mortgage market in recent memory” (Porter, 1966), while others reminisced: “In the good old days – like a few months ago – the family who wanted to buy a home was more concerned with finding the right piece of property than finding the money to buy it. But not anymore” (Feeley). Another article from 1966 stated “the

door to home ownership has been effectively closed, in this year of tight money, to those who do not have substantial amounts of cash on hand for their down payment”. New home construction slowed down, reaching a 20-year low by October 1966 (Shanahan). By 1969, the situation on the lending market was deemed to be “critical” (“Help Yourself to Fanny May”). As a result, the Federal National Mortgage Association - commonly referred to as “Fanny May” – increased its activities in an attempt to make money more easily available to Americans.⁶⁶ Beginning in 1968, Fanny May no longer set mortgage prices, but rather auctioned commitments to buy already existing mortgages for three, six, or twelve months respectively, thus reversing its entire secondary market pricing operation: “This radical departure for the agency was predicated on a review of the tight money situation and its effect on private home buildings (“Home Mortgage Industry to Get Shot in Arm”).⁶⁷ In 1970, Fanny May purchased loans insured by the FHA and the Veteran’s Administration (VA) in bi-weekly auctions during which it supplied \$300 million on average in financing (“Help Yourself to Some Fanny May”). In 1971, with the economy further deteriorated, Fanny May was “the only market right now” and their auctions were called “the only game in town” (Mandala). After its privatization in 1970, Fanny May expanded, and entered the market for mortgages backed neither by the FHA nor the VA. To heighten these mortgages’ appeal (and to remain competitive) Fanny Mae offered them with down payments as low as 5 per cent (“Fanny May Assesses Mortgage Plan”).

While Fanny May and other mortgage associations engaged in a battle to offer the most competitive mortgage rates, those who were already homeowners faltered under rising taxes, higher unemployment figures and the oil crisis. Particularly low-income homeowners, often on government-backed mortgages, suffered, and in 1972, delinquency rates in government-backed loans rose sharply: while they had been at 8.72% in 1971, they reached 10.7% a year later (“Delinquency Rising on Mortgage Loans”). Blue-collar homeowners were particularly hard hit during these early 1970s, as can be seen from the areas in which delinquency rates were on the rise: “regions associated with the auto strike and with layoffs in defense and space industries and in durable goods industries” (“Delinquencies Show Increase”). In addition to rising unemployment figures as the Vietnam War wound down in 1973, other

⁶⁶ The Federal National Mortgage Association had been set up as part of the New Deal. It was then a federal agency authorized to use federal funds to buy government-backed mortgages (which are mortgages backed by the Federal Housing Administration, the FHA) on the open market “thus pumping cash into the housing market in time of economic stress” (“Nixon Fires Fanny May President” 2).

⁶⁷ This, and further unconventional financing steps by the Association were only possible since the 1968 Housing Act had included a provision regarding the privatization of Fanny May “to give [...it] more flexibility in carrying out its role as a secondary market for Government-insured mortgages” (Finney).

burdens plagued American homeowners: as the United States entered a prolonged energy crisis, homeownership was increasingly associated with more burdens, higher costs, and fewer freedoms. The postwar prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s had waned – inflationary prices and higher taxes, which had been necessitated in part by Johnson’s ambitious plans of a “Better Society” as well as the war in Vietnam, hit homeowners hard, and some sources began to talk about renting as a feasible option to slow down the rise in costs of living: “as a tenant, you avoid the landlord’s responsibilities for the supply of heat and other utilities. While your rent will go up, the landlord’s costs may go up faster than the rent he can charge” (Porter, 1973).

In 1968, even before the energy crisis hit, *LIFE* ran a story entitled “Almost all of them end up in the red”, and it stood in a marked - and interesting - contrast to the “Ideas in Houses”-series. The article took a close look at six families’ finances, finding that the money earned by these families was simply never enough. It should be pointed out, however, that all families had incomes around \$20,000 which put them well above the 1968 average income of \$7,700 per year, and in the top two percent of U.S.-incomes at the time (“Almost all of them end up in the red” 59). And yet, the way *LIFE* put it, these families could hardly make ends meet, and the article stated “None felt prosperous, most in fact felt poor [...] by the time the six finish paying for the simple necessities, like a self-cleaning oven, and jaunts like a weekend at Disneyland with the kids, there is simply nothing left over for plain fun” (“Almost all of them end up in the red” 59). One may pause for an instant and think that this article is dripping with irony – “simple necessities” like a self-cleaning oven? But the author is anything but sarcastic in his assessments. Such an oven and jaunts to Disneyland have been presented as necessities for the middle-class-lifestyle by *LIFE* for decades. Such things were expected as givens instead of luxuries by the American consumer with an above-average-income. When taken on average these six families spent (annually) \$1,146 for entertainment (such as season tickets for football, the opera, the theater), \$1,196 for vacations, \$1,020 for hired help (while none of the women holds a daytime job), and \$1,428 for clothing. When considering the national average income, which amounts to \$641 per month, one finds that these six families, who spend around \$2,342 for entertainment and vacations each year, spend an average family’s 3.65 months’ worth of income on leisure and recreation. Five of the six families are homeowners (with homes valued between \$35,000 and \$50,000), but only four out of the six manage to save any of their income – for what, the article does not specify. It may not be the children’s education, however. One head of family - Bruce Smith, TV executive and owner of a home valued at \$35,000 and a lake house which cost \$7,000 as well

as \$1,025 per year in upkeep – is described as follows: “He does not want [...] to be rich but only wants to get his kids educated. To this end, he often goes out in the yard with his 5-year-old boy, Paul, and tosses around a football, exhorting him to ‘Catch the ball. Do good. You may get a football scholarship’” (“Almost all of them end up in the red” 62). I think the author’s goal in including this scene may well have been the portrayal of a true American work ethic: work hard and you will be rewarded. However, the fact that this statement stems from a man who is able to spend \$1,025 per year for the upkeep of his lake house while the average national tuition rate per student at the time amounts to about \$507 per year (“Shapp Scorns Republican Progress on Roadbuilding”), is also indicative of another mindset: “I should not have to cut back on my consumerism just to get my children an education.”

While the article in *LIFE* dealt with families with above-average incomes, the middle classes in particular felt the pinch more strongly than before. In 1969, “In a time of relatively high incomes and full employment, there are actually more wage-earner bankruptcies than in the depression of the 1930s” (“Families’ Debts Reach New High”). Half of all families making less than \$5,000 per year were considered to be “in debt trouble”, and two out five American households carrying installments debts, “are having difficulty paying off” (“Family Debts Limits Vary”). The presidential campaign of 1968 was dominated by talk about the “forgotten Americans”, a term used to describe the economic plight of Americans from various income groups.⁶⁸ This indicates that households in all income ranges perceived their money to be tight.

In many cases, the lack of funds was blamed on the combination of inflation and high property taxes: “Over-all pay increases [...] melted away under the combined impact of higher prices and higher taxes” (“Melting Paycheck.”). According to a 1969 survey, only 24% of the American public believed current taxes to be “reasonable” while 72% found federal, state and local taxation simply “too high” (“Taxes Are Too High”). The continuous rises in taxes between 1967 and 1970 were often blamed on Johnson’s ambitious welfare programs which led to an “increased tax burden” being literally “heaped upon” American citizens in those years (“Check That Tax Burden”). The tax burden, specifically for homeowners, became a political issue and played a large role in state and national elections throughout the

⁶⁸ Some identified the Forgotten American as a member of the lower white middle class: “He’s the bulk of the nation’s labor force [...] He makes \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year, of which 20 per cent goes to the government and another five per cent to inflation. He is honest, patriotic, confused” (“Lower White Middle Class Angry at Blacks”). Others saw Forgotten America in the upper middle class suburbs: “taxpaying, God-fearing, non-rioting, undemonstrating types in the middle class neighborhoods, most of whom are white” (Wicker). Again others, pinned it on age: “The forgotten American is the old American” (“All-Volunteer-Army of Two Million Men?”).

early 1970s. California Governor Ronald Reagan, for example, proposed a \$1 billion tax reform bill in 1970 and defined the “forgotten American” not based on his income, but his homeownership-status. The bill was “to fulfill past election campaign promises by easing the ever-growing property tax burden on the California homeowner [...] Many such homeowners are the so-called ‘forgotten Americans’ Reagan has said” (“Property Taxpayers May Gain Help Through \$1 Billion Reform.”). Candidates in the 1972 presidential campaign also targeted the homeowners’ tax burden: In an editorial for the *New York Times* in which he talked about the reasons for his candidacy, Hubert Humphrey explained: “Building a better America means tax reform. It means [...] lifting the property tax burden from the homeowner” (“Humphrey: Why I run.”). During the presidential primaries, another candidate, John Lindsay, mayor of New York, called for tax credits for homeowners with incomes under a certain threshold so as to ease the tax burden on them (“Lindsay Urges a Tax Credit On Property Tax Bills”). Other candidates from both parties followed suit.

A Return to Farmers: Owners & Tenants

LIFE did not include these property-tax-burdened homeowners in any of their articles. Instead, it featured a type of homeowner that had not been discussed in the magazine for decades: the farmer.

In June of 1971, *LIFE* published “Quiet Falls across the Plains”, an article explaining to readers how rural towns “are shriveling and dying” (22). More and more Americans, according to the article, were leaving behind their rural hometowns as it was requiring increasingly large parcels of land to make a living from one’s farm. The author introduces readers to Hans Jorgensen from Vienna, South Dakota. Jorgensen and his wife had just auctioned off their possessions to start a new life in the city. One thing about Jorgensen is important: “For 21 years he plowed and planted and harvested” (27) yet he never managed to become a farmowner. Instead, even after two decades, he worked the land as a tenant, turning over a third of his produce to the landlord. In 21 years, the author points out, Jorgensen never had to pay income tax “because he never earned enough” (27). Consequently, Jorgensen decided to quit, selling his equipment and furniture and trying for a new beginning. After paying off his debts, he and his wife find themselves with no more than a few hundred dollars for said beginning.

The image chosen to illustrate Jorgensen’s last day on the farm he has worked for 21 years is a dreary black and white photograph (Figure 5.8) showing his silhouette as he walks his dog through the fields. At least partially due to the black and white nature of the image,

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the field looms black and barren. Interestingly, images such as this, as well as images not displaying any leaves on trees, suggest that the pictures were taken in wintertime. Yet, the article was published in June, and the author mentions how spring has been far too dry. By indirectly suggesting that this winter field is in fact the way Jorgensen’s fields look in the summer, his farming capability is further questioned.



Figure 5.8 – The field taking up more than half of this image, looks barren, yet the article suggests that the image was taken in spring – this further underscores the lack of Jorgensen’s farming success.

The article on the Jorgensens in and of itself may not stand out. However, when compared with another farmer’s story published in *LIFE* four months later in September 1971, it becomes significant.

In September of 1971, *LIFE*’s “300 Years on the Same Piece of Land” introduced readers to Hugh Tuttle, a farmowner who was the tenth generation of his family working the land. The author referred to the Tuttle farm as “the nation’s oldest family farm” (46) and explained that “Even back before it was American soil, before there was any such nation to be part of, it was Tuttle land” (46). This focus on the longevity of the Tuttle’s ownership of this land not only marks an explicit return to old rhetoric of responsible farm owners who take care of their land for the generations to come. The author further noted Tuttle’s father had to restore fertility to the soil “after parts of the farm had been mistreated by short-term tenant workers” (47). This is reminiscent of the rhetoric discussed in the introduction and in chapter

1 and of the findings of President Theodore Roosevelt’s Public Lands Commission in 1905, also discussed in chapters 1 and 3. This Commission had argued that irresponsible herding practices of sheep tenant ranchers led to arid lands and long-term damage. This particular *LIFE* article seems carefully aimed at reviving old romantic notions of responsible farm owners who are one with the land and feed the nation. At the same time, there is something defensive about the way in which the author explains to his readers that Hugh Tuttle actually attended Harvard University but left because he was “farm sick” and chose to pursue an agricultural studies degree close to his home instead. By pointing this out, the author established Tuttle as an intelligent and educated man who has made a conscious choice to work his land. The author may have chosen to include this fact so as to make Tuttle more appealing to a readership that might – post *Silent Spring* – view farmers with some suspicion.

First and foremost, by describing Tuttle in this way, the author sets him clearly apart from Jorgensen who never managed to become a farmowner. Tuttle, too, is set to leave farming behind - but not because of financial difficulties, but rather because his son is not interested in taking over the family farm. The images included in the article create the impression of a solid and well-off farm family. One image provides an overview of a day’s haul of produce (Figure 5.9) which is carefully arranged so as to paint an image of abundance in times of rising costs of living. Everything – even the potatoes – has been cleaned so as to look inviting to the reader’s eye. This romanticized display of farm produce with its focus on the results and no mention of the hard labor, reiterates images shown in *LIFE* and OWI posters during World War II. It also carries *LIFE*’s catering to readers’ environmentalist notions to new heights. What is more, it sets Tuttle ever more apart from his tenant counterpart who had been photographed alongside a barren field. That picture, as I mentioned above, may possibly have been taken during the winter months, while the text suggested that it was late spring or early summer. This makes Tuttle’s harvest seem all the more striking. It seems that while *LIFE*’s representations of suburban/urban homeownership had shifted considerably throughout the decades, its take on farmownership had remained stable.

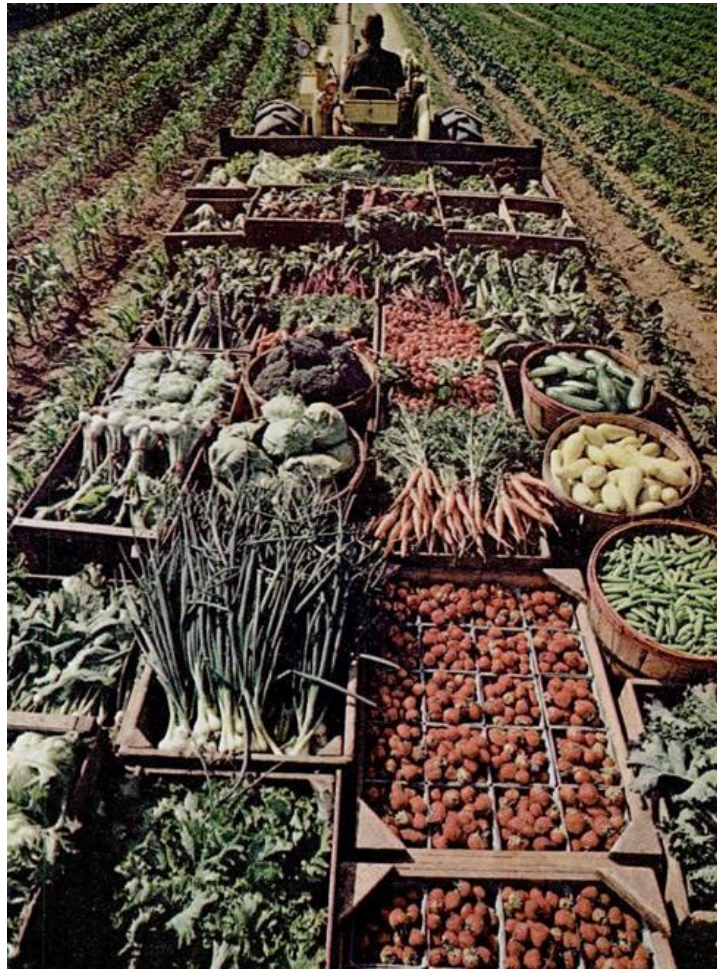


Figure 5.9: The images selected for “300 Years on the Same Piece of Land” paint a romantic picture of farm life and ownership

Concluding Remarks

Overall, I found that *LIFE*'s homeownership representations of the late 1960s and early 1970s predominantly focused on homes as havens saving their owners from the troubles of the outside world. This is underscored by the way in which the “Ideas in Houses” homes are reminiscent of castles in appearance as well as they ways in which their owners live their lives seemingly untroubled by any current events. One might argue that the article “Almost all of them end up in the red” contradicts this, yet none of the families introduced there actually find themselves in financial woes bad enough to cut back on their expenses. They only “feel poor” because they cannot consume quite as much as they want to. *LIFE* only depicts the tenant farmer as *forced* to change his lifestyle due to economic concerns. The farmowning Tuttle may find himself without a successor to his farming business, but this situation arises from within his own family. Outside troubles do not seem to affect him at all – an impression that is underscored by his plentiful (and particularly clean) harvest (Figure 5.9).

And yet, as mentioned throughout this chapter, the economy declined throughout this time and it continued to do so in the following years. By 1973, the energy crisis became visible as long lines formed outside gas stations, but its effects could be felt well before then. Between 1972 and 1973, energy bills rose by 48 per cent, and they rose again by that amount between 1974 and 1975 (Savage). I am convinced that these rises in costs were intensified by the fact that homes had been built as quickly and cheaply as possible in the preceding decades, which in turn meant that the majority of them had not been constructed with energy-efficiency in mind.⁶⁹ In an attempt to counter the energy shortage, the Federal Energy Office assigned petroleum allocations, resembling World War II rationing (Light 82) – what a change from the consumerist mentality of the 1950s and 1960s.

LIFE had celebrated homes for being “castles” throughout the 1960s, but homeowners’ independence was challenged as the government asked schools and private homes in January 1974 to keep their thermostats six degrees lower than they had done in the previous winter. More than a suggestion, this was a request with consequences for those owners who did not abide by it: “[If] a homeowner consumed an inordinate amount of fuel he would be faced with government red tape in attempts to get more. It means ‘an awful lot of inconvenience’ for anyone who does not abide by the government’s request to turn down thermostats” (“Lower Thermostat’ Energy Aide Says”).

As the energy crisis wore on, homeowners were increasingly called upon to insulate their homes so as to need less energy to keep them warm in the winter and cool in the summer. By 1977, owners faced a serious shortage in insulation materials (“Home Insulation”) which made it not only more expensive to insulate the home you already owned, but also drove up prices of homes that were being built. As late as April of 1977, 79 percent of Americans expected the energy shortage to last another ten years (Fusso 129).

Home prices, which had been rising in the late 1960s already, continued to rise. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter complained that “Home price inflation and high interest rates threaten to put homeownership out of reach for first-time homebuyers” (Carter, Jimmy). By that point, however, *LIFE* was no longer around to report on these issues. The last issue of the magazine was published on December 29, 1972.

⁶⁹ This was also true for many schools: the rises in energy costs with the U.S.-school system at that time were equivalent to 43,000 teachers’ salaries (Savage).

Conclusion

It frequently happens that an element of the standard of living which set out with being primarily wasteful ends with becoming, in the apprehension of the consumer, a necessary of life; and it may in this way become as indispensable as any other item of the consumer's habitual expenditure.
(Veblen 55)

Looking at *LIFE's* homeownership constructions from the 1930s onwards supports the above quote from Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. While always targeting a middle- to upper-middle class readership with above average incomes, as time wore on, homeownership representations of *LIFE* became increasingly lavish. To a considerable extent, this is certainly caused by the overall rising standard of living experienced by American society throughout the twentieth century. So, for one, looking at *LIFE's* homeownership representations provides insight into socio-economic developments within U.S. society. It also equals an in-depth look at American consumerism, a term which *Webster* defines as “the belief that it is good for people to spend a lot of money on goods and services”.

The belief that consumerism carries with it positive side effects has remained rooted within American socio-cultural values despite economic setbacks experienced along the way. According to Jon Wisman, economics professor at American University, to this day (his paper was published in 2009), Americans' belief in vertical mobility – though somewhat shaken – remains stronger than in other wealthy nations. This belief continues to shape Americans' habits of consumption:

[How] hard one works is generally not directly observable. What more readily catches attention is how much one can consume, which can stand, more or less, as a proxy for how hard one has worked. Thus, because Americans believe more strongly than do peoples of other wealthy nations that they are individually responsible for their own social standing, they feel more strongly compelled to demonstrate status and hence class identity through consumption. (Wisman 91)

Veblen, thus, remains applicable to American consumption patterns, as do *LIFE's* homeownership projections that were so closely intertwined with middle class status.

Yet, class status is not the only aspect of a homeowner’s “way of living” created within *LIFE*. Chapter 1 discussed how *LIFE* equated buying a home with helping the U.S. economy recover. Throughout the war years, homeowners were projected as responsible citizens doing their part in winning the war (chapter 2). The housewives quoted in the article on the “Roundtable on Housing” (chapter 3) suggested that a well-constructed home had a positive impact on a child’s development. In the article on retirement communities, the author explained how one’s home served as a nest egg for old age – the sale of one’s home enabled one to retire comfortably (chapter 4). Finally, homeownership, as well as certain comforts attached to it, was projected as an American normalcy and as a characteristic setting the nation apart from others (chapter 5). And while *LIFE* published its last issue in 1972, these projections have continued to shape U.S.-American homeownership discourses into the twenty-first century. Presidential rhetoric is particularly well suited to illustrate this.

For example, financial deregulations of the 1990s were justified by President Bill Clinton by referring to homeownership as a “great promise of American life” (Clinton), which is a line similar to messages conveyed within *LIFE*. While down payments on houses had risen in the late 1960s and early 1970s to somewhere between 20 and 30%, this was reversed in the 1990s as banks offered new types of mortgages, some of which featured zero-down payments.

Clinton’s successor President George W. Bush followed the same rhetorical line as illustrated by a 2003 speech in which he stated:

Homeownership is more than just a symbol of the American Dream; it is an important part of our way of life. Core American values of individuality, thrift, responsibility, and self-reliance are embodied in home ownership. I am committed to helping more families know the security and sense of pride that comes with owning a home. (Bush)

In this particular speech, President Bush celebrated homeownership for embodying crucial American values that were inspired by Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁷⁰ Bush was not the first - nor will he have been the last – U.S. president to credit homeownership in such a way, and all of the positive associations with homeownership listed by Bush have been

⁷⁰ Bush’s focus on “thrift” can be traced back to “frugality” praised by Franklin in his list “13 Virtues” (featured in his autobiography), while “individuality” and “self-reliance” are prominently featured in Emerson’s essay “Self-reliance”, published in 1841, in which Emerson calls on the reader to “trust thyself” and “never imitate” (Emerson).

represented in connection with homeownership within the pages of *LIFE*. Similar to the magazine’s homeownership representations, Bush’s projection omits certain dimensions of the homeownership discourse. While praising homeowners for their self-reliance, he also talked about his commitment to helping people achieve homeownership, which in turn suggests that they do not rely on themselves at all, but on his leadership to achieve that particular American Dream. Furthermore, as Bush praised thrift and responsibility as aspects of homeownership in 2003, real estate speculation had reached a level comparable to that leading up to the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁷¹

Only a few years after this particular speech by President Bush, the most recent U.S.-housing bubble burst in 2006 and caused a severe financial crisis. With manufacturing jobs moving overseas throughout the early 2000s, unemployment figures had risen, as had foreclosure rates on homes that had been mortgaged to the hilt and financed on very tight budgets. Homeowners, insurance companies, banks and loan corporations alike were hit unprepared. Soon, the housing market was saturated and as foreclosed properties continued to enter the market, home prices continued to decline drastically. In response, general spending habits of Americans diminished accordingly.⁷² As American homeowners spent less money, stores and restaurants – as well as their subcontractors and suppliers – made less money and dismissed employees who in turn fell behind on their mortgage payments, leading to further foreclosures. As homes stood vacant, neighboring units also declined in value.

By the time Barack Obama took office, the American economy was still reeling. And yet, three nationwide surveys from 2011 and 2012 suggest that owning a home remained an important goal for many Americans. In May, 2011, a survey by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center found that eight in ten Americans “agree that buying a home is the best long-term investment a person can make” (“Nationwide Open House June 4-5”). According to a survey by the Meredith Corporation from October 2011, 69 percent of renters agreed with the statement that “No matter what happens in the U.S. housing market, owning a home is still an important goal in my life”. Additionally, 86 percent of homeowners questioned still felt that

⁷¹ The real estate boom of the 1920s lasted from 1925 to about 1928, collapsing only weeks – in some areas days – before the stock market crash in 1929. Chicago banks were hit particularly hard: 95 percent of bank foreclosures in the area were caused by real estate speculations (Esbitt 456).

⁷² As home prices rose 44% between 1995 and 2001, homeowners’ wealth levels had grown and they had increased their spending accordingly (Bloomberg Business Week). This phenomenon is termed Wealth Effect – based on the increase in one’s perceived wealth (as the market value of one’s home rises), one increases one’s spending accordingly. It is estimated that, had home prices not risen as quickly, but rather grown according to pre-bubble growth rates which lay around 0.5 percent annually between 1975 and 1995, annual consumption in 1995-2001 would have been approximately \$250 billion lower (Baker 2).

“owning a home was a good investment”, and 85 percent of them maintained that “owning a home is one of their proudest accomplishments”.⁷³ In April, 2012, the real estate company Century 21 also conducted a survey, finding that 82 percent of renters were looking to buy their own home. Of these, 80 percent would sacrifice dining out, shopping, vacations, and other luxuries so as to save up the necessary down payment. Ten percent of this group claimed they would reduce their contributions to retirement plans so as to secure the down payment (Glink). It must be noted that the last two surveys were undertaken by companies with an avid interest in rekindling the real estate market – Century 21 being a real estate company, and the Meredith Corporation publishing magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Country Life*. Since these companies would have an interest in achieving a certain result, the questions may have been phrased so as to encourage that outcome (namely renewed confidence in homeownership). However, they were published in papers across the nation and featured on national television (the Century 21 survey results, for example, were featured on *CBS News*), perpetuating the impression that the dream of homeownership lived on among the majority of Americans. As a matter of fact, as housing prices slowly recovered starting in 2012, demand for homeownership rose along with them. In 2010, *CNN Money* had posited the question whether a housing shortage may be on the horizon, as people would be looking for homes again once the job market rebounded, and as construction had all but halted, demand may be outstripping supply (Christie). By 2016, this prediction seems to have come true. In January of 2016, the *Washington Post* published an editorial talking of the “historically low number of new and existing homes for sale” and lamenting that “housing has swung from being vastly oversupplied in the bust to being in what more and more is a shortage” (Zandi). Other sources back up *The Washington Post*. An editorial in *Forbes Magazine* suggested that current homebuyers are “frustrated with a lack of choice” (Woellert). Local newspapers reported similar findings for their respective areas of publication throughout the United States: The Texan *San-Antonio Express News* quoted an economist from the *Texas A&M Real Estate Center* as saying, “We can outbuild any growth trend and we’ve done it for decades. We’re not doing it this time.” (Olivo); in California the *Contra*

⁷³ The Meredith Corporation is a media marketing services company. Its portfolio includes home improvement / lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Country Life*, and *Traditional Home*. The survey mentioned here is part of Meredith’s studies looking buying behavior and decision-making processes of their readership so as to target their advertisements accordingly (Website: www.meredith.com).

It should be noted that home magazines achieve high circulation numbers and count themselves to the highest selling magazines in the United States, indicating that there remains an avid interest among Americans in how to beautify one’s house. *Better Homes and Gardens* was the third-bestselling magazine in the country as of January 2016, surpassed only by the AARP’s magazine and its bulletin. *Good Housekeeping* also belonged to the ten bestselling magazines in 2015 (“Top 10 U.S. Magazines by Circulation”).

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Costa Times reported that “The Bay area’s tight inventory continues to put pressure on housing prices” (Scheinin); the Ohio based *Journal-News* also referred to “low inventory” of homes and “very high competition” for available homes (Levingston).

Much has happened and much has changed to and within American society since *LIFE* published its last issue. And yet, one cannot help but notice certain parallels between representations of homeownership within *LIFE* and representations of homeownership today.

The lamentations about a lack of housing stock following the recent economic crisis appear very similar to *LIFE*’s repeated calls to increase construction activities (and single family home purchases) in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Once again, American housing is being portrayed in U.S. media as “a failure, a problem, a potential boon and boom” – while it played a crucial role in the past economic crisis it is now hailed and treated as one of the solutions to it.

Residential segregation by income has been on the rise in recent decades which – among other factors – has impaired social mobility within U.S. society as it has led to “increasing concentrations of low- and high income children attending separate schools. Peer problems, geographic mobility, and challenges in attracting and retaining good teachers have made it difficult to provide consistently high-quality learning experiences in schools serving a large proportion of low-income students” (Duncan and Murnane 9). Recalling *LIFE*’s homeownership representations between 1959 and 1965 (chapter 4) on separation of homeowners based on their educational and occupational backgrounds helps in understanding the root causes behind this development.

Repeatedly, I have pointed to the fact that African Americans were absent from *LIFE*’s homeownership projections with the exception of the excerpt from *Peacable Lane*. Subsequently I discussed discriminatory lending and real estate practices against African Americans eager to become homeowners and escape the inner cities. Within the pages of *LIFE*, the African American middle class did not exist. Race remains an issue when it comes to homeownership: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2012 only 42 percent of African American families were homeowners, while the national homeownership rate lies at 64 percent; and white homeownership was as high as 72 percent. A 2013 analysis by the Center for Responsible Lending (CRL) found that Black and Latino homebuyers are “typically denied access to private sector conventional mortgages that over the life of a loan are far

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cheaper than the government-backed offerings” (Crowell). As access to loans is thus limited, so is access to decent neighborhoods and accordingly good quality school districts.

In conclusion, this means that looking at representations of homeownership in *LIFE Magazine* does not only provide insights into that particular era’s cultural discourse. Rather, the ways in which homeownership was projected within *LIFE* – either as a condensation of symbols and messages formulated elsewhere or created by the magazine’s editorial staff – have survived even the latest economic downturn and remain in place. Therefore, these representations make up the foundation of modern-day U.S. homeownership ideology.

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