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Historicizing the U.S. Model Home

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Abstract

As a building type distinct from that of the conventional dwelling, model home has served as a pivotal instrument of architectural, social, and economic persuasion in the 20th century United States. Unlike traditional dwellings, with their emphasis on residential privacy, model homes are defined by their function as visitor spectacles, serving as "dialogic devices" that communicate specific cultural and consumerist values. By inverting domestic privacy into public performance, model homes – from the avant-garde to the everyday - have promoted innovations in social reform, mass-market consumerism, and advanced domestic technology. Over the course of the twentieth century, "Reformers" have used model homes to advance Progressivist "domestic science" and social stability; "Affluencers" and "Levelers" have employed them to sell aspirational lifestyles and facilitate mass-produced postwar suburbs; "Branders" and "Tastemakers" have used them to shape consumer desire and aesthetic sensibilities; and "Futurists" have deployed model homes to pilot radical ecological and technological visions. In all these applications, the model home acts as a sophisticated "didactic machine," not simply reflecting US housing trends but actively constructing them. The role that model homes have played in bridging the gap between architectural innovation and the lived reality of the domestic environment make them compelling objects of historical inquiry.

Twentieth century housing booms and reform movements in the US employed a powerful new instrument to present architectural and domestic ideas at scales both communal and personal: model homes. They have ranged from high-profile installations at international expositions to the humble sales devices found in suburban developments. Simply defined, model homes are residences built for public viewing: a function that inverts conventions of social privacy intrinsic to the dwelling as a building type. According to social historian Philippe Ariès, domestic floor plans composed of insular rooms gained favor in the eighteenth century, "as the house altered in conformity with this new desire to keep the world at bay."¹ The model home exposes the most private of all spaces to inspection by strangers, transforming a sequestered family life into a public performance, and converting personal household possessions into stage props. Particularly when "manned" by a model family engaged to enact the tasks and leisure rituals of

household life, the juxtaposition of simulated privacy and public scrutiny yields results best described as uncanny or, in German, *unheimlich*: a term applied to domestic architectures of estrangement by theorists ranging from Sigmund Freud to architectural historian Anthony Vidler. The antithetical relationship of the German adjectives *heimlich* (homelike) and *unheimlich* (uncanny) fascinated Freud, who observed: "the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open."² It is precisely this uncanny conflation of public and private space that makes the purpose-built model home an effective vehicle for commercial and ideological propaganda, with staged intimacy obscuring the mechanics of persuasion.



Figure 1. Spectators peer through a living room window at the "family" of actors engaged to depict the pleasures of postwar domestic affluence at We're Building a Better Life, U.S. Marshall Plan-sponsored model home exhibition staged in West Berlin in 1952. US National Archives, Still Pictures Division, RG286 MP GEN 1903.

In laying bare domestic interiors for visitor scrutiny, model homes defy an elemental principle of their originating building type. The model home's radical synthesis of domestic

intimacy with social spectatorship injects the functions of two decidedly non-residential building types found in Nikolaus Pevsner's pioneering taxonomy of modern building types--exhibition pavilions and market halls--into the program of the dwelling. Its blurring of public and private spatial categories argues for the model home's consideration not as a simple residential prototype but as a building type *sui generis*. Building types are typically abstractions rooted in the conjunction of formal and functional characteristics.³ Conventionally, residential building types are assessed and systematized by analyzing formal elements that define each typological variant as an exemplar of its overarching category – apartments, townhouses, or bungalows, for example. Typologies are documented with 'analytique' graphics that depict the building envelope and interior configuration, with generic furniture icons inserted to suggest spatial programming. Architects use the resulting form-based genealogy to inform subsequent designs. Both in concept and execution, however, two-dimensional drawings and scale models fall far short of representing the lived experience that constitutes the model home's *raison d'être*. At their core, model homes are dialogic devices created to connect residential producers with viewers. Model homes test new ideas, make arguments about lifestyle and subjectivity, and allow sponsors to gage public response. As physical artifacts, they make avant-garde visions credible, innovations in technology palpable, and claims of economic progress plausible. Model homes provide glimpses of an aspirational family life, anticipate a future still under construction, or celebrate quality-of-life achievements available in the here-and-now. These unique applications require rhetorical analysis to assess the relationship of each exemplar to the typology's development over historical time.

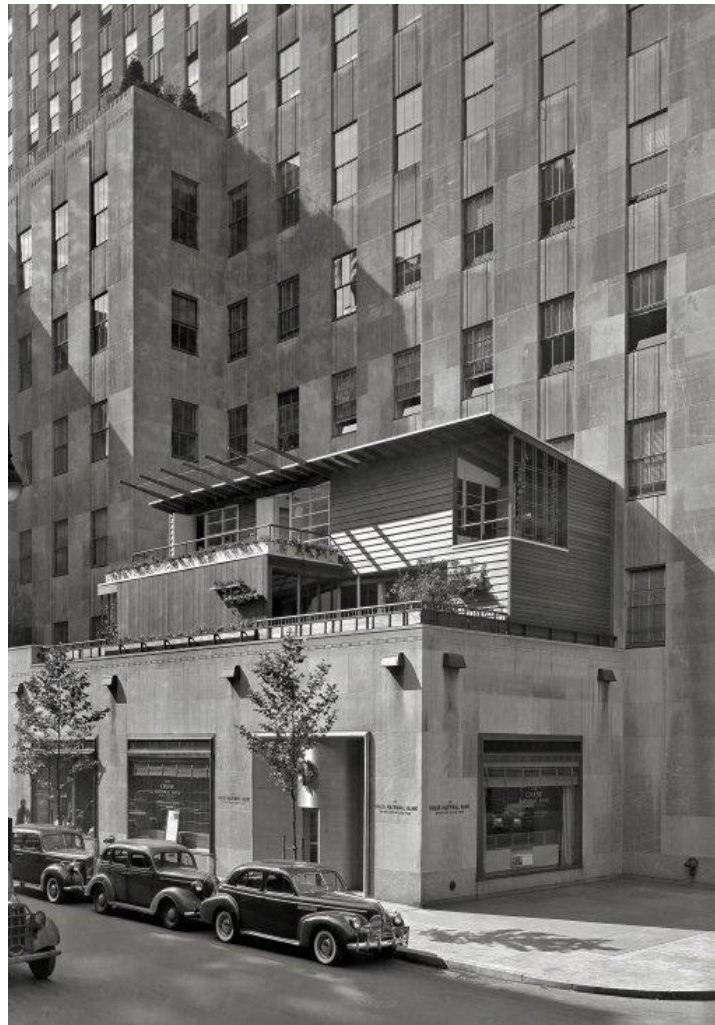


Figure 2. Edward Durrell Stone with Howard Myers and John Fistere, The House of Ideas, New York City, 1940, featuring interiors by Dan Cooper and furnishings by Jens Risom. Photo: Gottscho-Schleisner, Shorpy. https://www.shorpy.com/node/16240?size=_original#caption

The improbably coupled functions of the model home—part private residence, part public exhibition—and its mechanics of persuasion were on display at Rockefeller Center in New York City in 1940. The 100,000 visitors attracted to Rockefeller Center on any good day encountered a streetscape oddity: Edward Durrell Stone’s 1940 House of Ideas attached to the façade of a Fifth Avenue high-rise like a barnacle on a ship’s hull. Commissioned by *Collier’s Magazine*, the display was said to reveal that “modern architecture has stopped being a cause and settled down to comfortable living.” Inside and out, warm wood finishes defied the stereotype of avant-garde residences as “cold factory-like places in which you would not wish to live”: a repudiation of “hard-line” modernism for a “soft” alternative that anticipated Lewis Mumford’s shock-inducing critique of MoMA’s International Style by seven years.⁴ Inside, oiled

wood chairs by émigré designer Jens Risom introduced Americans to Danish modernism a year before his partnership with Hans Knoll revolutionized contemporary American interior design. Oak plywood walls of drawers and cabinet doors “that can open [...] to reveal a complete honeycomb of storage space,” presaged George Nelson’s modular Storagewall, featured on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1945.⁵ In short, Durrell’s built manifesto unveiled design approaches, innovative products, and architectural discourses that would rise to prominence in years yet to come. The House of Ideas remains all but forgotten today, however—an occupational hazard of a transient building type with a lifespan typically measured in weeks rather than decades. In “The Exhibitionist House,” Beatriz Colomina notes: “Many exhibition experiments gain their force precisely by physically disappearing while inhabiting the spaces of publication, of memory, of fantasy.”⁶ As demonstrated by Stone’s House of Ideas, disappearing acts can also herald cultural oblivion.

Modelling Homes and Householders

US cities and suburbs hosted thousands of model homes over the course of the twentieth century. Given their “exhibitionist” job description, how should model home performance be appraised? Uncovering the latent content of a demonstration dwelling requires lines of inquiry specific to models’ use and context. What economic, social, or political intentions motivated its construction? How did scripted tour narratives present their story line? What “readings” of the model home are expressed in visitor responses? Room sequencing, amenities, and domestic technology all telegraph messages that contribute to a home’s exhibition narrative. In understanding how model homes convey lifestyle aspirations, promote new technologies and construction practices, and express political, social, and aesthetic ideals, historians must scrutinize not only exercises in pedigreed “high style” architecture but also the marketing prototypes built by mainstream housing developers.

Appraisals of model homes are also enriched when the spatial container and its interior appointments are examined in tandem. Whether furnishings are bespoke or mass-produced, stylistically coherent or aesthetically incongruous, curated by a designer or stocked by a retailer, interior design plays a vital narrative role. Just as in theatrical productions, these props frame the activities of a model family and connect them with economic processes happening “offstage.” Staged household appointments guide the spectator’s imagination and provide a framework for speculation. What would it be like to inhabit a different kind of home? What would it feel like to inhabit a different life? When furnishings and their spaces materialize imagined realities, interior decoration is an armature for the reinvention of human subjects.



Figure 3. A 1950s stock photo distributed by the Ewing Galloway Agency, the largest photography agency of its era, idealizes model home visitors and the aspirational affluence of postwar, male-headed households.

Model Home Creators and Publics

Model homes are produced with a manifest intent to persuade, distinguishing them from the material culture of private dwellings. The spectrum of clients that finance model homes is as varied as their messages: the list includes developers and building supply manufacturers, exhibition organizers and theme park builders, architects, publishers, department stores, research institutes, and government agencies. Rather than reflecting values that can be attributed to a society, model homes document the beliefs of a sponsor, first and foremost. They are created to advance an argument—or several simultaneously. Created for display in the public sphere, model homes function as instruments of discourse, linking promoters with publics, fostering communities of interest, and precipitating debate and discussion. Case studies can be grouped as discursive catalysts on topics like social reform, economic affluence or egalitarianism, consumer branding, aesthetic distinction, and futurist innovation. Connecting trends in model homes' messages, target audiences, mechanics of persuasion, and evolving methods demonstrates the impact of the model home in social and political debates of the twentieth century in the US as well as the rise of new systems and professional specialties focused on using the model house as a dialogic device for familiarizing new ideas and swaying the public toward desired, if not always achievable, realities.



Figure 4. Workingman's Model Home: Katharine Bement Davis (curator), W.S. Perry (architect). State of New York exhibit at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. Source: Smithsonian Institution, Image ID: SIL, SIL7-247-02. Order form: https://www.sil.si.edu/ImageGalaxy/request.cfm?customer_images=SIL-SIL7-247-02

The Reformers

If any one person deserves credit for pioneering the model home's use as a representational medium, it would have to be Katharine Bement Davis, a graduate of the class of 1892 at Vassar College. When visitors to Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition became sated with its majestic White City, they could experience a more intimate spectacle in Davis's contribution to the fair: a plain, two-story structure planted beside the Anthropological Building. Identified by a placard as "New York State Exhibit, Workingman's Model Home," it attracted "a constant ever-changing crowd of people," according to newspaper reports. The exhibit displayed the highest living standard attainable on a yearly income of \$500, the average working-class male wage for a 60-hour work week. Using this baseline, Davis calculated that the home could cost no more than \$1000 to construct (adjusted for inflation, \$36,000 in 2025), yielding an affordable rent of \$10 per month, yet still providing a reasonable profit for both the builder and landlord. She solicited a floor plan tailored to fit the standard urban 25-foot-wide lot from Prof. W.S. Perry of the Pratt Institute. Stripped of decorative flourishes to cut building costs, the fairground model home proved so popular that working drawings offered for sale went through two printings. Davis allotted a \$300 budget for interior furnishings, chose and purchased everything at retail price (just as a working family would), and proved it by displaying each item with its price tag. Transformed into voyeurs, fairgoers watched as a local widow, hired to play a model housewife, cooked, cleaned, and mended clothes for a family of five.⁷ Her own two daughters portrayed the home's model children, a security guard billeted in a fairground barracks fulfilled the role of household provider, and a doll served as the family infant. In orchestrating the installation's

architectural and interior design, exhibition narrative, and resident performances, Davis displayed an astonishing command of the model home's "medium specificity"—the expressive capacities specific to a dwelling staged for public inspection. In response to pressing "sociological problems of the day," the American model home and its full range of didactic techniques made their debut here in fully developed form.⁸

The Workingman's Model Home was a product of Progressivism, a political philosophy and reform movement of the late-19th and early- 20th century. Its visionaries championed "domestic science" and industrial efficiency as tools to achieve a modernized society through raised living standards and increased civic engagement, and to resolve problems ranging from class antagonism to family instability.⁹ The confusion of social justice with social control inherent in Progressivist exaltation of expert knowledge was also on display at the Chicago Fair. In a month-long trial to show that healthy nutrition was possible on a working-class income, Davis assembled a menu with daily "bills of fare" posted for observers and imposed strict eating codes for the model family. The regimen excluded candy for dietary and budgetary reasons. When visitors attempted to sneak sweets to the model home's "abused" children, Davis intervened. (She had less success with the model paterfamilias, who confessed to fairground transgressions involving cookies and ice cream). At the experiment's conclusion, its subjects were weighed, examined by a physician, and declared to be in good health. While Davis dismissed as "obviously ridiculous" the notion that her model home could resolve "all social and industrial problems of the day," its regulation of everything from eating to sleeping (separately for parents, despite the added cost of purchasing a second bedstead), imposed prescriptions based on middle class values as a comprehensive formula for working class improvement.¹⁰

The perils of tenements and boarding houses haunted the Workingman's Model Home. According to Progressives, both of these congregate housing types degraded working class health, virtue, and patriotism.¹¹ When the 1920 census revealed that less than half of American families owned their home, a coalition of private interests and government agencies seized upon homeownership as a key to economic and social stability.¹² Better Homes in America (BHA), founded in 1922 by the women's magazine *The Delineator*, launched a nationwide campaign that championed middle-class propriety in home décor and housekeeping. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and supported by federal officials from Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to President Warren Harding and First Lady Florence Harding, BHA leaders asserted that "the problems of the United States could be solved through specific instruction in the construction, organization, and supervision of proper homes."¹³ By 1930, BHA exhibitions and model homes had reached more than 7,000 communities from coast to coast.¹⁴



Figure 5. In the early-1920s, developer J.C. Nichols embellished his Armour Hills subdivision near Kansas City with fountains and statuary meant to be seen from artfully curved roads: amenities of a new age of automotive transit. Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri <https://pendergastkc.org/article/jc-nichols-and-country-club-district-suburban-aesthetics-and-property-values>

The Affluencers

In 1922, the year that the BHA was founded, pioneering real estate developer J. C. Nichols of Kansas City, Missouri opened a public showpiece home in the Armour Hill subdivision of his famed Country Club District, one of the earliest planned, deed-restricted subdivisions in the nation. Would-be buyers signed a covenant that limited hedge heights, prohibited barnyard animals, established mandatory building setbacks, and barred sales to or occupancy by “Negroes”: a contractual arrangement that became standard for U.S. suburban development well into the postwar era.¹⁵ Nichols dubbed his model home the “Electric House Beautiful.” Decorated as if its family-in-residence had suddenly vanished, the display home featured electric heating, an all-electric kitchen, and electric appliances like a dishwasher, ironing machine, sewing machine, phonograph, hair dryer, and multiple motorized room fans. Over two hundred wall outlets powered this battalion of modern conveniences. Co-sponsored by a local utility company and viewed by over 30,000 visitors, the “Electric House Beautiful” was priced at more than three times the cost of a typical bungalow in the same neighborhood.¹⁶ Why would a developer attempt to boost sales of house lots with a model residence that few of his clients could ever afford? In believing that an unattainable home would confirm their sense of affluence rather than erode it, Nichols used what anthropologist Grant McCracken terms “displaced meaning strategy”: the theory that exclusivity enshrines aspirational consumption. As fetish objects, coveted trophy homes and their trappings materialize a lifestyle that might

otherwise might remain conceptually inaccessible.¹⁷ The model home's capacity to popularize affluence is supported by another theorist of consumer behavior, James Duesenberry, whose "demonstration effect" hypothesized that physical exposure to "superior goods" triggers dissatisfaction with one's own living standards more effectively than mere knowledge of such luxuries.¹⁸ In the century since Nichols' built his "Electric House Beautiful," model homes have proceeded to tirelessly shift the goalposts of an "American Dream" calibrated in domestic comforts.

The Levelers

An experimental home built by the Technical Division of the U.S. Housing Authority (USHA) in the late-1930s proved decisive in shaping American postwar housing. Closed to the public, it applied empirical research to determine how minimum size and maximum efficiency could be combined in a product that lower-income homebuyers could afford. To find the practical limits of spatial compression, the four-room-plus-bath dwelling featured movable walls mounted on rails. Engineers gradually reduced the size of rooms in which professional home economists carried out their assigned household tasks. The study produced a "minimum house" plan of 624 square feet—the approximate floor area of the three-car garage appended to one out of every five new homes in the US today—emphatically reversing a trend of the 1920s, during which the size of the average new home increased from 1,048 sq. ft. to 1,233 sq. ft. While the shrinking test home remains little known and largely undocumented, it informed the FHA handbook *Principles of Planning Small Houses*, published in 1935 with updates in 1940 and 1946; served as an underwriting baseline for FHA mortgages; and reset national norms for suburban housing, making the USHA domestic laboratory one of the century's most consequential model homes.¹⁹

Conditions for a radical transformation of housing finance and production came with the Great Depression and World War II. Wall Street's 1929 crash sent mortgage defaults and bank failures spiraling; new home construction plummeted by 95 percent between 1928 and 1933.²⁰ To salvage the nation's finance system and housing market, the New Deal's Federal Housing Administration in 1934 unveiled a novel program of federally insured home loans that transferred risks of foreclosure loss from private lenders to the federal government. To qualify for FHA mortgage insurance, lending institutions had to offer homebuyers a generous repayment schedule of up to twenty years at a fixed interest rate: a mortgage innovation that remains largely unique to the US, and which never would have emerged without government guarantees.²¹ FHA market intervention produced a novel housing ideology synonymous with The Great Levelling. It equated broadly accessible homeownership with "the American Dream," a term first popularized by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 bestseller, *The Epic of America*.²² Federally insured low-cost mortgages were not readily available to all Americans, however: FHA

guidelines, which declared any “infiltration of inharmonious racial groups” a threat to neighborhood home values, set segregationist criteria for approving home loan applications.²³ As a consequence, the New Deal partnership of federal insurers and private lenders “resulted in an unprecedented expansion of home ownership that was almost wholly limited to white middle-income Americans,” as architectural historian James Jacobs notes.²⁴

A surge in rearmament spending in the late 1930s ended the lingering effects of the Great Depression and prompted federal support for large-scale homebuilding. To spur new housing starts for defense industry workers, the FHA established construction loans covering 90 percent of appraised home value—a subsidy that transferred virtually all risk from the developer to the federal government—and special mortgage rates for arms company employees that made payments on a new home equivalent to the price of renting one. To scale up production, West Coast builders of war housing departed from the standard development practice of acquiring a large parcel of land and subdividing it into lots for resale to builders. Instead, a new generation of merchant-builders combined the former roles of land developer and homebuilder, vertically integrating the construction process and most of its supply chain—from ownership of forests and sawmills to assembly-line homebuilding, landscaping, and sales—under single management.²⁵ Major appliances were included with the home so that their cost could be folded into its FHA low-interest rate mortgage. By the mid-1940s, what the business journal *Fortune* dubbed the “California Method” of suburban mass-production had produced a not only a wartime stockpile of inexpensive small homes but also the formula for a postwar building boom.



Figure 6. A row of mass-produced "Cape Cod" homes at Levittown, NY in 1947

With the return of millions of soldiers after World War II, pent up demand for housing created a seller's market for new homes designed in accordance with FHA minimum standards. New Deal investments in road infrastructure, wartime advances in homebuilding, and postwar Veteran's Administration benefits that included zero-down payment mortgages, produced synergies that refashioned farmlands across the nation as new suburban landscapes. In 1947 at Levittown, a Long Island development synonymous with postwar suburbia, thousands of conservatively styled, two-bedroom cottages based on minimum house guidelines sold for an affordable \$6,990 (adjusted for inflation, \$102,000 in 2025). Blue- and white-collar workers stood together in line to buy the same model starter home: a concise domestic expression of The Great Leveling. As the influence of FHA minimum house planning peaked, critics mounted an attack, citing research on pathologies associated with overcrowded housing and forced home moves to accommodate new children. Architects and women's groups called for larger new houses. Indeed, the average size of the new single-family home already had begun a steady climb: to 983 sq. ft. in 1950, 1,170 in 1955, 1,289 in 1960, and 1,525 in 1965—but for reasons having little to do with psycho-social anxieties that motivated activists in the anti-minimum house movement.²⁶



Fig. 7. Visitors examining postwar suburban model homes, Lakewood, California, 1950. *Photo: City of Lakewood*

The Branders

During the initial postwar years, a housing famine made the new home market a seller's delight. By the early-1950s, however, productivity gains in suburban housing development had offset the shortage. With increasing consumer prosperity and diminishing housing scarcity,

builders borrowed retail merchandising practices from department stores and car dealers to encourage homebuyers to “upgrade” from their minimum starter home. Model homes were essential to the task. By 1948, 75 percent of the builders surveyed by the *National Real Estate Journal* reported using model homes as promotional and research tools. In 1950, the proportion reached 90 percent. Articles in trade magazines explained how model home promotion practices ranging from creative use of color to cross-branding campaigns with appliance manufacturers increased sales.²⁷

With homebuilders entering the uncharted territory of competing for the attention of increasingly affluent, lifestyle-conscious buyers, the American model home entered an improvisational golden age.²⁸ Builders began using their display dwellings as an informal data mining tool in the quest to better understand the needs and desires of postwar home buyers. While the stereotyping surrounding developments like Levittown, New York or Lakewood, California is that builders selected a single design and offered it in massive numbers, the reality for many US home builders was much different. They confronted a market in a constant state of flux, requiring refinement and improvement of home models to keep pace with changing tastes, social patterns, technological advances, and their competition. Builders employed model homes to make design propositions, visitors responded, and builders adjusted their housing catalogs accordingly.

To spark excitement about his Panorama City development of 2,000 new homes in Los Angeles County, developer Fritz Burns unveiled a battalion of twenty-four demonstration homes. He furnished six in styles ranging from traditional to modern, produced others to display optional floor plans and left some partially unfinished to reveal construction quality. Each was “manned” by a female hostess trained to answer questions posed by up to 3,000 visitors every weekend.²⁹ Inspired by the crowds drawn to shopping malls and world’s fairs, the National Association of Home Builders staged the first National Homes Week in 1949 to celebrate “a unified industry with a single purpose – to build more and better houses more economically for the nation’s citizens.”³⁰ Its most popular event, a “Parade of Homes” produced region-by-region, showcased model homes by different builders along a prototypical suburban cul-de-sac. A carnival atmosphere pervaded these open-air bazaars of local housing production. At its peak, National Homes Week was a major event in sizzling real-estate markets like Dallas, where in 1956 local builders simultaneously offered five Parades of Homes with seventy-one different models seen by over two hundred thousand people.³¹ Providing a cheap weekend diversion for window-shopping families came at a steep price for developers, especially if the investment in a fully outfitted “idea home” failed to entice actual homebuyers. As one builder

lamented, "Any given model... could be hotter than a firecracker or it could be a dud. There's no way to know."³²

Hedging their bets, builders used model homes to zero in on designs that would become solid sellers. As part of the *House Beautiful* Pace Setter program, San Francisco Bay Area builder David D. Bohannon constructed a trio of houses in 1950 to determine how far suburban homebuyers would go in embracing modern styles. *House Beautiful* editor Elizabeth Gordon established the Pace Setter program in 1946 to promote a "livable," all-American version of modern design tailored to regional climate, tastes, and domestic tradition.³³ Bohannon unveiled three Pace Setter variants— a "contemporary" (modern), a California ranch, and a "traditional"— as boutique offerings. Inserted into a more conventional suburban development as a controlled experiment, he used visitor responses to determine which he should reproduce in bulk. The modern aesthetic of the "contemporary" was a non-starter, but the ranch-style Pace Setter proved more popular. As the visitor favorite, the "traditional" design constituted the majority of about four dozen Pace Setter houses that Bohannon ultimately added to the development in accordance with his market testing scheme, yielding a proprietary data set that demonstrated how model homes could be deployed to minimize developer risk.



Figs. 8 & 9. Publicity photographs of Mission Viejo "Spanish-style" model homes of the late-1960s and early-'70s in Orange County, California. Photos by H. Lee Hooper and Richard A Pucillio, courtesy of the Mission Viejo Public Library. <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt7v19r18r/>, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/kt2v19q83j/>

Given the profit margins at stake, specialist consultants soon emerged to reduce misadventures in model home merchandising and to create more sophisticated data sets for design preferences. Over the course of the 1960s, burgeoning economic growth, newly opened freeways accessing fresh stretches of undeveloped land, and the availability of expansive

ranches held in single ownership produced a frenzy of suburban construction across Southern California. Presiding over many of the most lucrative housing developments was “real estate guru” Sandy Goodkin of Sanford R. Goodkin Research Association (GRA). By advising developers on not only where, but also what to build, GRA was the first consultancy of its kind. Its origins dated to the late-1950s, when new home sales lagged due to oversupply. Goodkin began asking model home visitors which features they liked, what would prompt them to buy, and what they found most compelling about competing offerings. Continually elaborating his market research techniques, Goodkin helped merchant-builder giants like the Bren Company, Deane Brothers, and the Mission Viejo Company forge a “California look” that influenced builders across the nation. Surveying homebuyers to formulate products that fulfilled pragmatic and emotional needs, GRA crafted a brand identity for each new development, reinforced from landscape design to sales literature, and worked with cost estimators to ensure that trending features like “curved staircases, bonus rooms, [or] indoor-outdoor relationships” could be built at the desired price point.³⁴ As suburban tracts leapfrogged outward along the ninety-mile freeway corridor traversing Los Angeles and Orange Counties, establishing an optimal balance between construction cost and buyer appeal became critical. Success in inducing commuters to drive an extra thirty miles daily for a dwelling with the extras they wanted and at a price that they could afford produced constellations of far-flung suburban homes that by the mid-1970s were appreciating at a rate of 3 percent each month.³⁵ Market researchers trained at the “University of Goodkin” spread not only its methods but also a number of its “California-look” design flourishes throughout the nation’s housing industry.³⁶



Figs. 10 & 11. Left: Gregory Ain, staged living room interior for the Women’s Home Companion Exhibition House, New York Museum of Modern Art, 1950 (photo by Ezra Stoller/ESTO, *The Museum of Modern Art Archives*); right: The same room in 2021, as decorated by current owner Mary Kelly after the home’s relocation to a new site. (photo by Tony Cenicola/*The New York Times*).

The Tastemakers

“This Future has a Past,” an installation by Christiane Robbins and Katherine Lambert for the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, featured a lost 1950 model home built for MoMA in

downtown Manhattan. Erected in the museum's garden, the glassy, one-story pavilion was the last structure of any significance to be designed by Gregory Ain, not only a skilled stylist but also a social housing proponent denounced by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover as "the most dangerous architect in America" and subsequently blacklisted.³⁷ At the end of its New York run, Ain's model home vanished without a discernable trace: a fate visually represented by a blurred, bleached-out image of the structure created by Robbins and Lambert for the Biennale.³⁸ They remained convinced that the building had survived, however, and were proven correct in 2021 when a preservationist located it forty miles north of Manhattan in the village of Croton-on-Hudson. Dispatched by the New York Times to document the find, photographer Tony Cenicula framed his shots to match a set of interior views originally created for the museum's publicity campaign.³⁹ The paired images, made seventy years apart, revealed the dogged persistence of traditionalist sensibilities and, by extension, the failure of MoMA's midcentury mission to reform American popular taste. In deploying model homes to advance modernist alternatives to mainstream domestic taste, American museum curators followed the lead of canonic European predecessors: examples include the Bauhaus-produced Haus am Horn of 1923 and the 1925 Pavilion de L'Esprit Nouveau by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jenneret. Mies van der Rohe's model home for the 1931 Berlin Building Exposition greatly influenced Philip Johnson's career trajectory—first in interior design, later in architecture, and ultimately as a model home curator at New York's MoMA.⁴⁰ However, with notable exceptions like the subdivisions built by California developer Joseph Eichler, homebuyers spurned aesthetically cohesive modernist living, despite the best efforts of museums and their exquisitely curated demonstration dwellings.

The Futurists

Seen in hindsight, model homes said to be "of the Future" and "of Tomorrow" glow with retro nostalgia--after all, nothing ages faster than yesterday's tomorrows. Examined more closely, their blundered prognostications offer insights. Taken at its word, a House of Tomorrow allows visitors to experience the living environment of an era that has yet to arrive. Within this field of temporal displacement, the future is conjured from building materials and furnishings gleaned from the present. The first order of business is to stabilize the future by removing its indeterminacy. "The ungraspability of the future has something deeply disturbing about it, something we seek to dispel whenever possible," philosopher Bernard Waldenfels notes.⁴¹ In depicting futurity in the singular, every House of Tomorrow deflects a swarm of competing futures that, however plausible, fail to serve sponsor interests. When prophetic model homes showcase new domestic hardware or construction methods, their novelty affirms the triumphant march of material progress. Previous domestic technologies are dismissed as crude atavisms. However, social and economic orthodoxies always seem to endure. The hypothetical

owner of the steel-and-glass House of Tomorrow at the 1933 Century of Progress exhibition in Chicago would still commute to the office or factory, either by car or in an airplane stashed in the home's attached hangar. Prospective residents of Disneyland's 1956 Monsanto House of the Future inhabited space-age fiberglass pods equipped with plastic furniture, carpets, cabinets, countertops, and housewares. Yet within this theme park attraction, the "imagineering" of familial roles was anything but bold. Manning the home's petrochemical hearth, a perfectly coiffed "Housewife of Tomorrow" adorned in daytime pearls (synthetic, of course) executed all the cooking, laundry, and housecleaning duties of her midcentury predecessor. As with so many other time-travelling exhibits, futurism in Tomorrowland displayed stubbornly recursive social tendencies. Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that "we walk backward into the future" found an extreme example in a model home presented at New York's 1964-65 World's Fair. While not explicitly pitched as a house of the tomorrow, The Underground World Home promised that postwar suburban affluence could persist even after a nuclear holocaust. The pavilion's novel housing type, dubbed the Atomitat, sequestered the pleasures of a sprawling tract home, complete with backyard patio, inside a concrete coffer buried under fourteen feet of soil. Devised by a former chemical weapons expert turned homebuilder, the Atomitat and its vision of post-apocalyptic domesticity relied upon a snorkel ventilator and breakthroughs in air processing to remove fallout particles: a dubious yardstick for domestic progress but a development consistent with broader trends in postwar home technology.



Fig. 12 Fourteen experimental model homes powered by renewable energy and assembled entirely by college students stretch across the Washington D.C. Capitol Mall in 2002 during the inaugural Solar Decathlon.

Photo: Melissa and Richard King, *Solar Decathlon: Building a Renewable Future* (2024), page 51; likely to be a photo by Richard King, National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) photo archive, public domain.

A collection of model homes intended to define a very different housing future took shape under cover of darkness on Washington's National Mall twenty-five years ago. At one minute after midnight on 9 September 2002, fourteen collegiate teams began unloading disassembled components of solar-powered prototype homes from arriving trucks. Over the following two weeks, 500 students reconstructed the experimental 800-square-foot dwellings they had spent the previous two years designing and building at their home institution. The inaugural Solar Decathlon competition opened to long lines of curious model home visitors. Television, radio, and newspaper coverage brought national attention to the idea of a "net-zero energy" dwelling capable of producing all power requirements for household cooking, lighting, cleaning, bathing, and home computing. The plan to put a "solar subdivision" on the National Mall was the brainchild of Richard King, a research and development officer at the Photovoltaics Program at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory of the US Department of Energy (DOE). Observing the passion that teams of college engineering students devoted to entries in Sunrayce USA, a DOE funded cross-country rally for photovoltaic vehicles, King wondered whether a similar inventive fury could be unleashed in a design/build contest involving solar-powered residences. To add a dash of horserace excitement to a static display of domestic structures, King and other Sunrayce veterans devised a digital scoreboard, displayed online and on monitors throughout the Mall's solar village, that broadcast the energy performance of each showcase home in real time--a feat of technological wizardry that predated smart phones and smart homes by years, and which left viewers awestruck.⁴² The event attracted 100,000 visitors, creating enormous enthusiasm for subsequent competitions staged on the National Mall every two years through 2015. Solar Decathlons have been held in China, Colombia, Dubai, Egypt, France, Germany, Hungary, and Morocco. Their crowd-pleasing rivalry between contending model home teams has educated homeowners, informed homebuilders, and promoted "green" building methods in architecture schools across the globe.

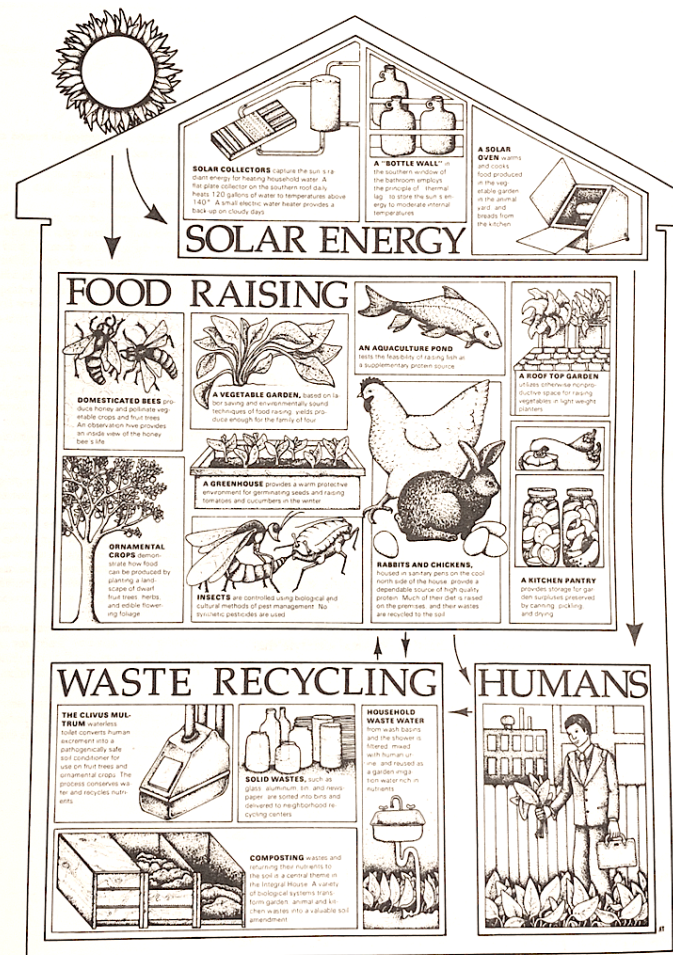


Fig. 13. Illustration from the 1979 Sierra Club publication of *The Integral Urban House: Self-Reliant Living in the City*, a manifesto on ecological self-built housing based on a model home developed by the Farallones Institute in Berkeley, California and open to the public from 1974 to 1979.

While celebrating college students as agents of change capable of "'disrupting' the status quo," the Solar Decathlon established scoring parameters that greatly constrained the field of invention.⁴³ An emphasis on solutions compatible with the housing market limited most entries to the single-family suburban formula standardized by several generations of merchant builders. In contrast, a model home built in Berkeley, California in the mid-'70s by a consortium of horticulturalists, architects, and student activists proved far more radical in its empirically grounded approach to ecological performance. The Integral Urban House envisioned a dwelling tailored to the needs of a novel family unit: a multi-species commune in which young volunteers assumed custodianship of life systems that supported not only human residents but also, chickens, fish, rabbits, insects, plant crops, and even bacteria. Backed by the Sierra Club and publicized in national media outlets, the Integral Urban House redefined the cultural and

functional meanings of home by recharting the domestic sphere as an integrated biosystem supporting a more-than-human family. An adaptive reuse project rather than new construction, it advanced seemingly strange (and often estranging) reuse strategies involving reclaimed construction materials, and recycled waste products, including the feces and urine of cohabiting people and animals. Whether this built manifesto on ecological survival constituted progress or its anthesis depended on the viewer, although as Waldenfels observes, "a future that had nothing alien or strange about it would not be the future."⁴⁴ Gaining a fuller perspective on the kaleidoscopic archive of abandoned futures represented in yesterday's houses of tomorrow provides yet another compelling argument for the model home as an object of extended historical inquiry.

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³ Brenda Case Scheer, *The Evolution of Urban Form: Typology for Planners and Architects* (Chicago: American Planning Association, 2010), 6-8.

⁴ Ruth Carson, "Collier's House of Ideas," *Collier's Magazine*, 15 June 1940: 16; Lewis Mumford, "The Sky Line [Bay Region Style]," in Joan Ockman, ed., *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 107-109.

⁵ *Life*, 22 January 1945.

⁶ Beatriz Colomina, "The Exhibitionist House," in Russell Ferguson, ed., *At the End of the Century: One Hundred Years of Architecture* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 158.

⁷ Wage-Earners' Homes: Sociological Problems at the World's Great Exposition," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, 17 Sept. 1893.

⁸ Joseph W. Barnes, "Katharine B. Davis and the Workingman's Model Home of 1893," *Rochester History* 43, No. 1 (January 1981): 1-20; Arthur Pound, "Housing—a Comparison" *The Atlantic*, February 1938: 219-22.

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¹⁰ Barnes, "Katharine B. Davis and the Workingman's Model Home": 9, 11-16.

¹¹ Gwendolyn Wright, "Prescribing the Model Home," *Social Research* 58, no. 1 (1991): 218.

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¹⁶ William S. Worley, *J.C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City: Innovation in Planned Residential Communities* (Columbia, Mo: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 211-13.

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