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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History
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Levittown and the Building of the Postwar Suburban Family

1. The making of the “affluent society”
 - a. Postwar economic boom
 - b. Demographic shifts
 - i. “Baby boom” peaked in 1957
 - ii. Migration from inner cities throughout the 1950s
 - c. Postwar housing boom and rising rates of home ownership
 - d. Federal government’s support of suburban development
 - i. GI Bill (1944)
 - ii. Home mortgages through VA and FHA
 - iii. Tax code revisions to allow mortgage interest and property tax deductions in the 1940s
 - iv. Minimized risk for large-scale developers
 - v. Interstate Highway Act (1956)
2. Levittowns and the mass production of suburban housing
 - a. Levittown, NY (late 1940s): 4,000 acres, over 17,400 houses, 82,000 people
 - b. Levittown, PA (1950s): 5,500 acres, over 17,300 single-family homes, over 70,000 residents
 - c. “We planned every foot of it—every store, filling station, school, house,...church, color, tree, and shrub.”—William Levitt
 - d. “The General Motors of the housing industry”
3. The cultural politics of Levittown
 - a. A new ideal of domesticity
 - b. Racial discrimination in the postwar housing market
 - i. “We can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two.”—William Levitt
 - c. Cultural conservatism and conformity
 - i. “No man who owns his own house can be a Communist. He has too much to do.”—William Levitt
4. Levittown and the suburban landscape
 - a. Standardized landscape aesthetic
 - b. Standardized interior spaces and an ethos of efficiency
 - c. Technologies of domestic labor
5. A new ecology of the suburbs
 - a. High-energy suburban home
 - i. Air conditioning
 - ii. Lawn maintenance
 - b. Suburban sprawl
 - i. Mudslides in southern California
 - ii. Wildfires
 - c. Septic systems: technically simple but ecologically complex
 - i. Infectious disease outbreaks, groundwater contamination, pollution of streams
 - ii. Increasing scrutiny from scientific research, public health organizations, popular press
 - iii. The suburban roots of environmentalism

For further reading

Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).