

Developing the American Dream: A Comparison of Levittown, New York and Celebration, Florida

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The American Dream has been a guiding principle to the expansion and growth throughout the United States' history. First coined in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams, he defines it as “the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability and achievement.”¹ The aspirations of success has been reflected in the built environment historically through westward expansion of Manifest Destiny to small towns of the early 1900s, suburbia in the 1950s, and urban life today. Levitt & Sons' Levittown, New York (1947-51) (**Figure 1**) and Disney's Celebration, Florida (1996-) (**Figure 2**) are both physical representations of the American Dream. Understanding Levittown is necessary to appreciate Celebration—a direct response to the perceived failures of planned subdivisions and reflection of the evolving Dream. While Celebration, Florida was built forty years later to be the anthesis of Levittown, the two developments share similarities in attempts to create the ideal community that make both the product of their respective era's definition of the conformed American Dream.

Built between 1947 and 1951, Levittown, New York was the first mass-produced suburban development and sparked what became an architectural and cultural paradigm shift in the United States for half a century. The four-thousand-acre, 17,466-house project built on a potato farm on Long Island, New York is named for its developers, Levitt & Sons Co—Abraham Levitt and his two sons, William and Alfred.² (**Figure 3**) As remarkable that the size of the development is, the techniques the Levitts applied to home building was revolutionary. Employing skills that William learned through rapidly building military barracks while serving in the Navy during World War II, Levitt & Sons commodified houses.

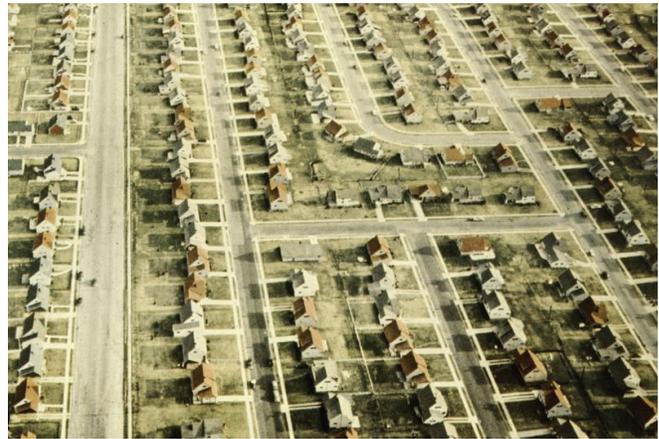


Figure 1: Partial aerial view of Levittown, New York. Source: NewsDay



Figure 2: Nighttime view of Downtown Celebration, Florida. Source: RAMSA

Levittown “tract” houses were built identically in a 26-step assembly-line process.³ Though rather than the product moving on a conveyor belt, specialized subcontractors moved from house to house working on the same specific element on each house. Rectangular concrete slabs would be laid by one team, another would erect walls, a third would install built-in cabinets. (**Figure 4**) Parts that could be were pre-fabricated offsite and installed, saving money and time on site. To streamline production, the Levitts controlled every step of production. They purchased a lumber farm and mill plant in California and built a concrete plant in New York. In 1950, they combined the ventures into a subsidiary of Levitt & Sons called North Shore Supply Company, that manufactured everything, down to the nails.⁴ The system was so efficient that at the peak of construction, a new 800-square foot house was completed every fifteen minutes.⁵



Figure 3: Abraham Levitt (middle) with his two sons, William (left) and Alfred (right), posing in front of a poster of Levittown, Pennsylvania. Source: Second Suburb

Ultra-efficiency at this scale wasn't possible overnight. They had to experiment with their innovative methods. In 1946, Levitt & Sons built a set of prototype houses to perfect the technique.

Levittown is the epitome of cookie-cutter sprawl. In its first phase, only one type of house was available for sale: the Cape Cod. The simple, traditional New England-esque house looked like a stereotypical house a child might draw in elementary school: the houses were small, one-and-a-half-story rectangular boxes with a pitched-tent roof, wood-sided exteriors, and classic window shutters as the only form of ornamentation. The houses featured open floor plans (as a way to cut costs on room assembly) and state-of-the-art appliances.⁶ They were set on lots that are about thirteen-hundredth of an acre. Duplicate tract houses were lined up on contiguous rows. When Levittown expanded in 1949, they introduced a second, larger house option, branded as the Ranch. William Levitt said in an interview that "We designed [the Ranch house] by building, ripping apart, and building again. The 1949 house...was torn apart more than thirty times...before we were satisfied."⁷ Depending on the year, between three and five variations of the Ranch were offered to buyers.

The layout of Levittown is an anti-grid grid. While there is not a single four-way intersection, Levitt & Sons mapped the 4,000 acres in a repetitive pattern (**Figure 5**). The development is a patchwork of zig-zag streets forming three-way intersections. The spillage of swerves throughout the property calmed traffic to protect



Figure 4: A specialized crew poses for a photo while installing cabinets and appliances for a Cape Cod house in Levittown, NY. Many parts, such as cabinets, staircases, and fences were pre-fabricated and assembled on site. Source: Getty Images

children playing in the streets, but more importantly it illusively reduced the severity of the homogeneity by placing each uniform house at slightly different angle than its neighbor.

Residents of Levittown were as homogenous as the houses. Homeowners were young white military veterans who came home from World War II looking to start a family. Around 50 percent of residents were Catholic in the 1950s. African Americans were banned from purchasing a house in Levittown, on what William Levitt deemed was a business decision: "As a Jew, I have no room in my heart for racial prejudice. But the plain fact is that most white people prefer not to live in mixed communities. This attitude may be wrong morally and some day it may change. I hope it will."⁸ Despite being Jewish, they did not even allow Jews to move into Levittown for the first couple of years. More than 80,000 residents lived in Levittown, New York at its peak.

While swatches of homogeneity do not sound appealing today, it is impossible to understand the construction and appeal of Levittown without proper context. The Great Depression, and World War II immediately following, created a fifteen-year lull in the housing industry. When soldiers returned home, many were forced to live with extended family because there was such a housing shortage.

Prior to World War II, Levitt & Sons were custom homebuilders throughout the New York area. They built expensive homes for wealthy clientele. William Levitt



Figure 5: The endless curved and zig-zag streets and identical houses can be seen from an aerial photograph of Levittown. Source: Curbed

too was sent to the Pacific with the United States Navy during World War II. The Levitts saw that they could capitalize on this housing demand.

In addition to high demand, the government highly subsidized new housing. The 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill, gave veterans low-interest, zero-down-payment loans to buy houses. While suburbs used to be sanctuaries for the rich, Levittown created a new standard for middle class housing. A Levittown Cape Cod could be rented for an attractive \$60 per month or purchased \$7,990 (Ranches were unavailable for rent and were sold at a pricier \$9,500).^{9 10} To create the perfect storm for suburbia, personal automobiles were now affordable and common amongst the middle class. People were no longer tied down to living near their workplace—they could commute from anywhere.

The 1950's was also an era of consumption and conformity. A response to the lack of consumption throughout the Depression and War, owning your own 800 square-foot house, with a private lawn, space for your car, and white picket fence was what Hanlon writes as "owning a material piece of the American Dream."¹¹ (Figure 6) The American Dream was embraced Levittown's branding—original residents of Levittown were known as "pioneers,"¹² paying homage to westward expansion during the Manifest Destiny era—a previous iteration of the American Dream.



Figure 6: A typical postwar nuclear family in Levittown poses happily in front of their Cape-Cod house. Source: University of Illinois at Chicago



Figure 7: A scene from the 1950's sitcom Leave it to Beaver featuring a tract house on "Colonial Street" on the Universal City backlot. Source: RetroWeb

Homogeneity was encouraged. Americans valued family and opportunity, both of which could be realized in new suburban lifestyle was defined and reinforced in pop culture as the American norm with postwar nuclear families of network sitcoms *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) living in tract homes (Figure 7). And besides, even though the houses were built uniformly, homeowners had opportunities to express individuality their lot. The attics were left unfinished for the homeowner to finish how they would like. Additionally, residents could choose paint colors for their house and landscape their yard as they wished.

It is no surprise why Levittown was replicated almost instantly across the country. Success led Levitt & Sons to build six more Levittowns across the world—including in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, as well as in Puerto Rico and Paris. The later projects had more housing style were available to choose from, with attractive names like “the Jubilee” and “the Country Clubber.” (Figure 8) But tract houses were replicated in greenfields around the United States, with thousands of such developments existing by the end of the 1960s.¹³ Eisenhower’s Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, creating 41,000 miles of interstates, made suburbs even easier for developers to build and more appealing for homeowners to move to.



Figure 8: An advertisement of Levittown, Pennsylvania, featuring the Levittown logo and new home models for the year. Home models included the Jubilee, the Colonial, the Country Clubber, and the Pennsylvanian (clockwise). Source: LevittOwners

Parking-dominated indoor shopping malls rose within driving distance of the houses, following the single-use zoning.

That is not to say that everyone liked conformed suburbia, which completely altered the entire American landscape in a single generation. The 1963 Pete Seeger hit “Little Boxes” pokes fun of tract homes that are made of “ticky-tacky.” Sociologist Louis Mumford wrote that the conformity of Levittown airs an eeriness. He described the paradox of being “a collective effort to live a private life.”¹⁴ Mumford continues on his critique of conformity to the minute lifestyle details inside their uniform houses of “witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated food from the same freezers.”¹⁵

Walt Disney Company’s Celebration, Florida, which broke ground in 1994 and opened its first phase in 1996 attempted to address the criticisms Mumford had of Levittown-inspired suburbs. Celebration is a product of the New Urbanism movement, a movement formed by architects, planners, and developers in the 1980s to counter car-centric suburban sprawl mess that Levittown created and revert to pedestrian-focused town planning that existed prior to World War II. Its master plan was designed by renowned firms Cooper, Robertson &

Partners and Robert A.M. Stern. To add diversity, individual buildings were built by varying architects, including famous postmodern architects.¹⁶ While Levittown was rows upon rows of houses, Traditional Neighborhood Developments (TNDs) like Celebration are built with intentional architecture, higher density, small blocks with tree-lined sidewalks, and as mixed-use developments, with retail, restaurants, and housing intertwined. Like Ebenezer Howard’s garden city, Celebration hopes to merge the best of both town and country—but without substantial industry in Celebration, it is difficult to call it a true garden city.

Celebration sits on an 11-square-mile plot of swampland, just southeast of Disney World, almost twice the size of Levittown (Figure 9). Though the town of 8,000 carries a nostalgic aesthetic, at-the-time Disney CEO Michael Eisner

described Celebration at its groundbreaking ceremony as a “community of tomorrow.”^{17 18} Community building is the guiding force behind every decision in building the town. Public spaces would be available in every residential section, known as “villages.” It’s criticized though for what many people sense as artificial. Stern responded to the criticism with “say what you want about Celebration, but it’s not cookie-cutter sprawl.”¹⁹ Just as Levittown has been replicated thousands of times across the country for over fifty years, Disney hoped that Celebration could serve as a national model for the anti-suburb.²⁰ And what better company to back a development that reshapes how people live than who brought the world picturesque Main Street, USA?

The mixed-use component of TNDs is critical to Congress of the New Urbanism co-founder Andres Duany. He compared the single-use zoning of suburbia to an unmixed omelet— “eggs, cheese, vegetables, a pinch of salt, but each consumed in turn, raw.” The ingredients taste much better when they are mixed together.²¹ Celebration hopes to emulate “cooked omelets” of the Southeast, like Charleston, SC and Savannah, GA. While there are many single-family houses in Celebration, it was critical for planners to create a town center that is the focal point, known as

Market Street. Today, the brick-paved street is home to independent shops and restaurants, including a café, bakery, art gallery, clothing and jewelry store, and children’s store. Though shops and restaurants in the development are a “point” for Celebration over Levittown, the restaurants and shops appear luxurious and not meeting the everyday needs of the residents.

This sense of place—the strong identity of a place felt among its occupants—is another important characteristic of Celebration. Yes, Levittown might be architecturally redundant, but houses were not in dialogue with each other. Instead of feeling harmonious, it comes across as sterile. Celebration takes the concept of a sense of place to the other extreme, micromanaging the aesthetics of the community to create harmony. Architects visited more than 30 traditional towns in the American Southeast for inspiration and to develop the architectural vocabulary.²² Buildings on Market Street are modest—yet stately—adhering to traditional Southeastern vernacular and painted in calm pastels.²³ (Figure 10) The town center also includes key civic institutions, many of which were designed by prominent postmodern architects Michael Graves designed the post office, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown designed the bank, and Philip Johnson designed the town hall



Figure 9: An artistic rendering of Celebration Florida, featuring dense development and lots of nature. It is frequent that New Urbanist developments are rendered in watercolor to stimulate nostalgia and serenity. Source: RAMSA



Figure 10: Market Street in Celebration, the heart of the town center, has architecture consistent with commercial districts of historic Southern towns. Source: RAMSA



Figure 11: The civic institutions were designed by prominent postmodern architects. Left is the town hall, who's 52 columns poke fun at the columns at classical government buildings, designed by Philip Johnson. Right is a playful, nautical post office designed by Michael Graves. Source: RAMSA



Figure 12 (above): The Bank of Celebration was designed by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. The large lettering on the façade aligns with Venturi and Scott Brown's view of buildings acting as billboards. Source: CityLab

(Figures 11 and 12). The decision to hire such high-profile architects for key institutions was an explicit way of Celebration showing the world that unlike Levittown, we have civic institutions and we're proud of them.

While there is architectural diversity throughout Celebration, it is controlled diversity. The Celebration Company, a subsidiary of Disney, authored an 82-page Pattern Book detailing the regulations for developments. The book outlines community and architectural patterns, for everything from measurements between a building and sidewalk (between six and twenty feet), the width of the main body of a house (no wider than 40 feet), to the aesthetics of front doors, fencing (white wood, white PVC, or black cast iron), address numbers, and paint colors.²⁴ (Figure 13) As Levittown gave a few house models to choose from, Celebration has six residential housing types with different sizes—from town houses to estates. The Colonial Revival and Classical styles would be the primary architectural type, but Victorian, Mediterranean, French, and Coastal-style houses, all of which are native to the Southeast but from different eras, would be intermixed to create the appearance of a history.²⁵ (Figure 14)

The sense of place is where Celebration receives a lot of criticism. The over-engineering of the appearance has made the town feel so perfect that it's phony rather than authentic. Much of the sense of place of Celebration comes from branding (Figure 15)—something parent company Disney is a world leader in. Similar to how Levittown marketed to military vets and their new families as a place to own a piece of the American Dream, Celebration markets itself as the picturesque small town you've always wished you've lived in. But the authenticity is as fabricated as the houses in Levittown. The town seal is meant to mesh the aesthetic of 1920's small-town America with the unique playful identity of Celebration. The homepage of Celebration's website is called the "front porch."²⁶

Figure 13 (below) : An image from the Celebration Pattern Book, detailing the relationship between a house, yard, and street. The Book was filled with visual guides like this one. Source: Celebration Pattern Book

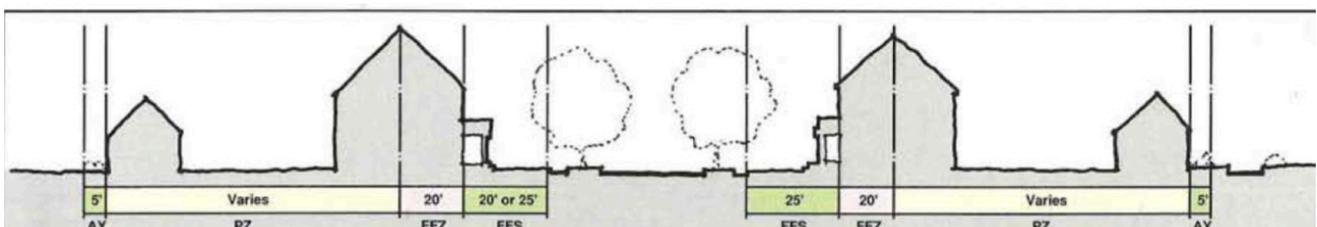




Figure 14: A row of houses, with varying architectural forms but similar dimensions, in Celebration. Notice the small plots relative to the house sizes. Source: RAMSA

To go with the neo-traditional architecture and branding, names of street names and parks play on the small-town identity to a point where it's laughable. They are definitional with a tone of nostalgia and sophistication. Major roads are "Campus Street," "Market Street," and "Celebration Avenue" (Figure 16)—not to be confused with "Celebration Boulevard" and "Celebration Street." An oval, tree-abundant park is named "Arbor Circle" and a narrow grassy area is called "Long Meadow."²⁷ The elementary school's sports teams are known as the Celebration Pride, who's mascot is a cross between two Disney icons: an adult Simba adorned with Tinker Bell's wings.

It's even more difficult for Celebration to come across as authentic when its developer is the king of make-believe. Being built by Disney was both a blessing and curse. Only a company like Disney can afford and is willing

to build as intricate an experiment as Celebration. But Celebration will never be able to achieve the authenticity it strives for with a name that trite and developed by Disney.²⁸ Michael Bierut, the brander of Celebration, argues though that Celebration is receiving unfair criticism—that neotraditional architecture has been a staple of America for centuries, pointing especially to the neoclassical and neogothic architecture of college campuses, which today are regarded as beautiful and historic. He says that people notice quality and feel over authenticity, but even so, "with enough time, anything can be authentic."²⁹ Boston University sociologists wrote in 1961 of Levittown that traditions "can be produced by force-draft methods when necessary. However, such traditions need do not readily receive full-fledged moral support."³⁰ Both communities lacked a history at its inception; one embraced the newness, the other pretended it had one. But like Bierut says, maybe authenticity will be felt by future generations of Celebrationers.



Figure 15: The seal of Celebration, FL. The seal draws from town seals of the early 1900s and meshes it with the "neighborhood" elements available in Celebration, including nature, bicycling, and a white picket fence, and the playfulness, through a girl being chased by a dog. The trademark sign in the corner is a reminder that the town is a corporate-owned community. Source: Celebration, FL

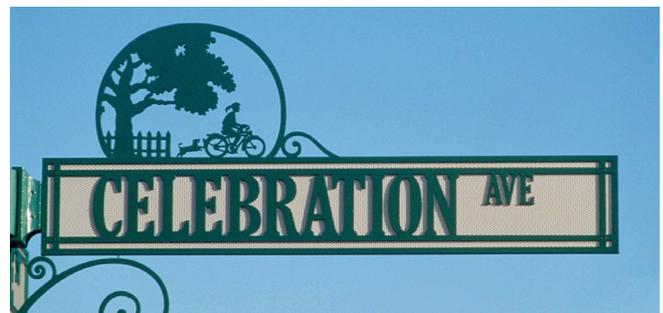


Figure 16: A typical street sign in Celebration. The street names and sign contribute to the sense of place. The signs have a variation of the town seal and use the font Cheltenham, a serif that is traditional, yet warm and playful. Source: CityLab

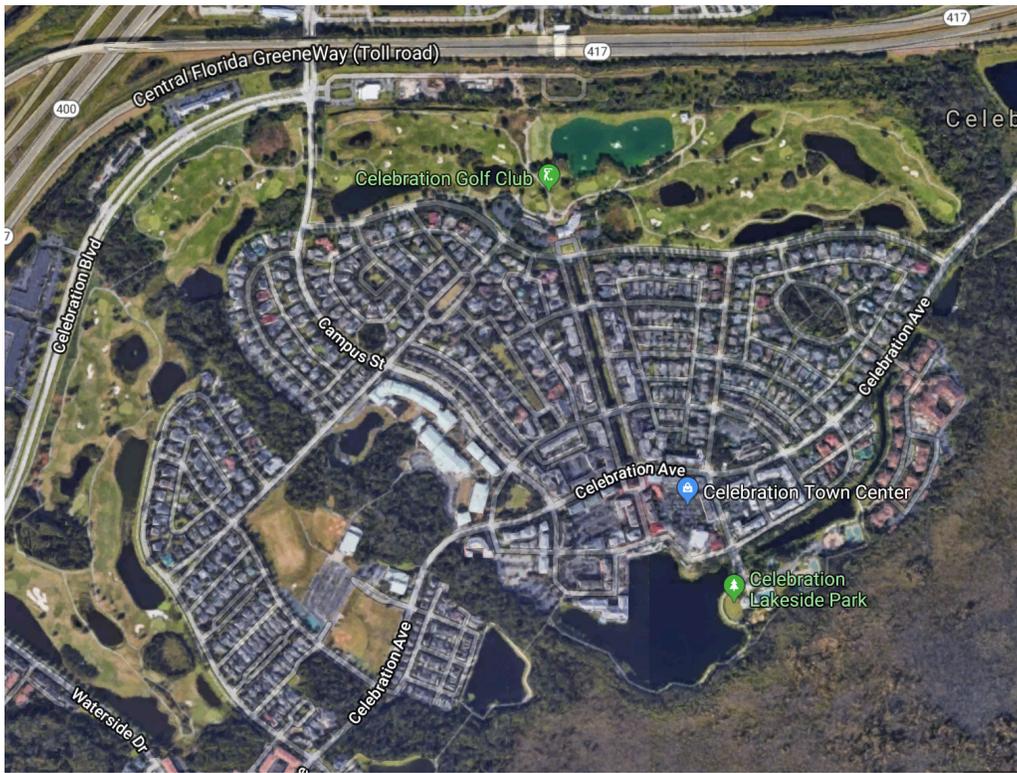


Figure 17: An aerial view of the main portion of Celebration. Visible is the golf course that acts as a greenbelt, separating the community from the highway, and the man-made lake that the town is centered around. Source: Google Maps

While Levittown was a “collective effort to live a private life,” in the words of Louis Mumford, Celebration wanted to embrace community. Levittown did not have any well-defined boundaries: while there’s a clear boundary of the houses Levitt & Sons built, only 13,000 of the 17,500 houses are within the Levittown zip code and the area overlaps with six school districts and other political and civic districts. There is no unifying umbrella for the residents of Levittown. While Celebration is part of Osceola County, they attempt to create a community for its residents. Walkability is emphasized and car infrastructure, such as parking lots and garages, are in the center of city blocks or in backyards to be out of public sight. In fact, Celebration shuns the institution that made Levittown a national success—the interstate. Though highways border the edge of Celebration, a golf course was built to act as a greenbelt barrier between the town and highways (Figure 17). Instead, the town hugs a (man-made) lake, because all great towns are on a body of water.

But like Levittown, a reason a community could be felt in Celebration is because of its homogeneity, just wealthier, with houses sold at an average price of \$345,700. The town is more than 80-percent white, like

Levittown, and Republican.³¹ Like its denial to lacking history, Celebration still brands itself as a “diverse... community, in every positive sense of the word.”³² At least Levittown admitted its homogeneity.

In many aspects, Celebration could be dubbed “Levittown 2.0”—a refined vision of Levittown, updated to current American ideals. Though Disney tried hard to prove it could create the opposite of Levittown, there’s irony that Levittown is frequently brought up in the same conversations as Celebration. Husband-and-wife Investigative reporters Douglas Fratz and Catherine Collins wrote in their account of living in Celebration that it is “the biggest experiment in social engineering since Levittown”³³ While denser and a stronger focus on community than Levittown, Celebration plays off of the same sentiments as Levittown, with the white picket fence as one example. As an early experiment of a TND, Celebration was looked to as a prototype and improved on by future developers, following in Levittown’s steps. Both communities saw themselves as near-perfect homogenous communities that are bubbled escapes from the imperfect, dangerous, and diverse city.

Endnotes

1. Leigh Gallagher, *The End of Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2013), 65.
2. Brandon Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010), 3.
3. Richard Longstreth, "The Levitts, Mass-Produced Houses, and Community Planning," in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 139.
4. Barbara M Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 27.
5. Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States*, 4.
6. Gallagher, *The End of Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving*, 37.
7. Longstreth, "The Levitts, Mass-Produced Houses, and Community Planning," 144.
8. Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States*, 3.
9. Gallagher, *The End of Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving*, 38.
10. \$60 per month in 1947 equated to \$683 per month in 2018; \$7,990 in 1947 is \$91,615 in 2018; \$9500 in 1949 is \$97,177 in 2018—these houses are very affordable in today's standards too. Source: dollartimes.com
11. Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States*, 3.
12. Louis H. Orznack and Irwin T. Sanders, *A Social Profile of Levittown, New York* (Boston, MA: Boston University, 1961), 9.
13. Hanlon, *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan United States*, 4.
14. Gallagher, *The End of Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving*, 46.
15. Gallagher, 46.
16. Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *Celebration, USA: Living in Disney's Brave New Town* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1999), 58.
17. "What Disney's City of the Future, Built to Look Like the Past, Says About the Present - Celebration, Florida," *The Economist*, December 24, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21712156-utopia-i-4-what-disneys-city-future-built-look-past-says-about>.
18. Note the language parallels between Eisner's description of Celebration and Walt Disney's proposal of EPCOT—the Experimental Prototype City of Tomorrow in 1966. Like EPCOT, Celebration also promised for cutting-edge technology. Though the proposals are different in vision, Disney continued to seek for the creation of an ideal community of the future.
19. Mark Byrnes, "How Michael Bierut Branded Celebration Florida," *CityLab*, November 4, 2015, citylab.com.
20. Frantz and Collins, *Celebration, USA: Living in Disney's Brave New Town*, 15.
21. Gallagher, *The End of Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving*, 40.
22. "Design Guidelines," Celebration, Florida, 2018, A-3, celebration.fl.us.
23. Contrary to the cartoonish replication of a midwestern town on Main Street, USA in Magic Kingdom, just 7.3 miles away.
24. "Design Guidelines," Table of Contents.
25. "Design Guidelines," A-4.
26. "Front Porch," Celebration, Florida, 2018, celebration.fl.us.
27. Perhaps it is because there isn't a history to name places after people or events.
28. It's worth noting that the association with Disney hurt Celebration enough that Disney sold the property to private developers.
29. Byrnes, "How Michael Bierut Branded Celebration Florida."
30. Orznack and Sanders, *A Social Profile of Levittown, New York*, 8.
31. "What Disney's City of the Future, Built to Look Like the Past, Says About the Present - Celebration, Florida."
32. "Front Porch."
33. Frantz and Collins, *Celebration, USA: Living in Disney's Brave New Town*, 5.

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