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