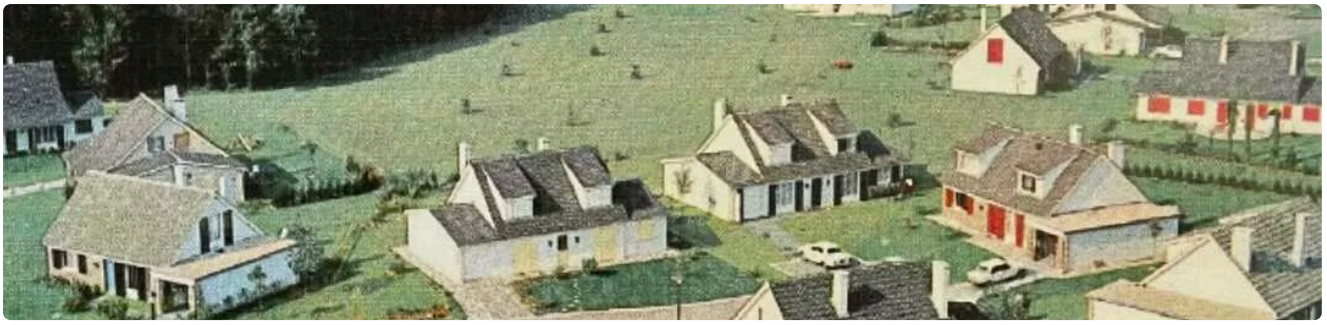
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Levitt-villes in France

Edward Berenson

In 1965, William Levitt, America's largest home builder and creator of the famous Levittowns, constructed a "new village" in the suburbs of Paris. He built 500 houses in Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis, whose mayor wanted to create an alternative to the grands ensembles he hated. It was a huge success and the first of several Levitt-villes en France.

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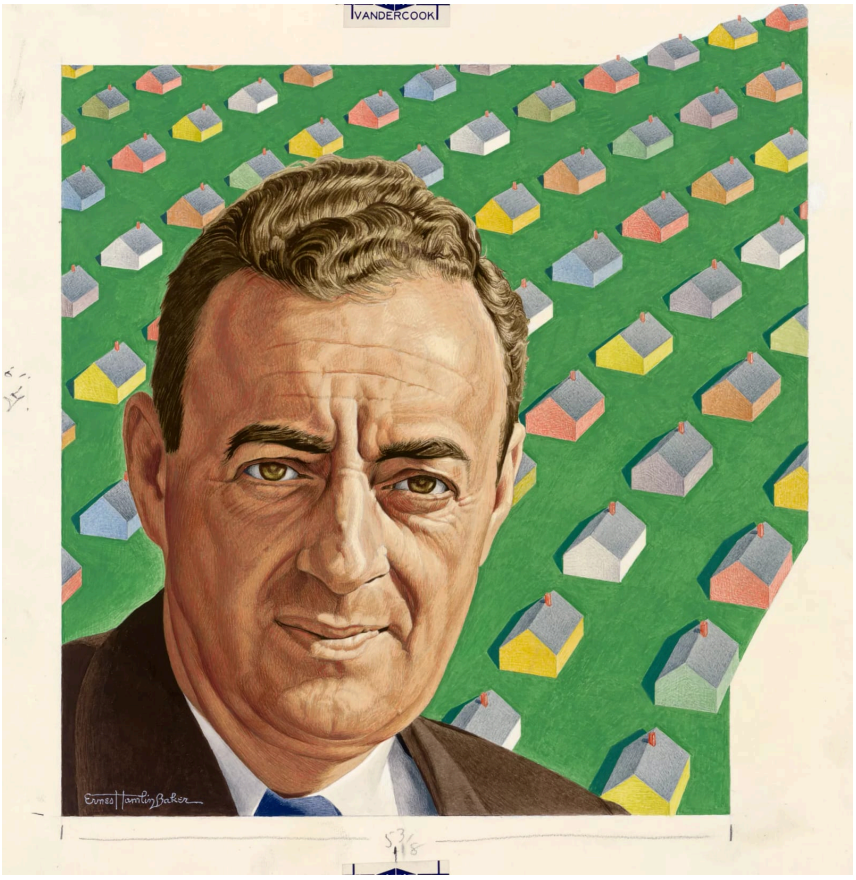
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Edward Berenson

Professor · History and Institute of French Studies · New York University · United States

Edward Berenson is a cultural historian specializing in the history of modern France and its empire, with additional interests in the history of Britain, the British Empire, and the United States. His most recent book is The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town (2019). He is at work on a book tentatively entitled Levittown International: Suburbanization in the Postwar World (Yale, 2025). In 2006, he was named a Chevalier dans l'ordre du mérit.

“France is in the same position today that Long Island was in fifty years ago” declared Bill Levitt at a Paris press conference in 1964. Levitt was the creator of several massive postwar American suburbs, “Levittowns” they were called, composed of identical or similar houses, built hundreds at a time using standardized components and an extreme division of labor. The American homebuilder found the French housing situation so backward that his company “can’t afford not to go there.” [1]



William J. Levitt, cover of the *Time Magazine*, July, 3, 1950

Source: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Levitt was referring to the construction of single-family houses, and he had a point. The building of “maisons individuelles” or “pavillons,” sparse before 1940, had largely stagnated since the end of the Second World War, and what already existed were mainly rickety shacks erected by homeowners in areas with virtually no infrastructure of roads, sewage systems, zoning rules, and the like. [2] This was the case despite the overwhelming desire for detached homes rather than apartments among French families of all social classes. In poll after poll, beginning immediately after the war and continuing to the present, seventy to eighty percent of French people have said they want to live in a single-family house surrounded by greenery and not attached to neighboring homes. [3]

What Levitt got wrong about postwar France was the notion that its building industry in general lagged behind the American one. In many ways, French homebuilding was more mechanized, and arguably more modern, than Levitt’s alternative. It’s just that to alleviate France’s severe postwar housing shortage and compensate for millions of substandard dwelling units, French leaders opted for large-scale apartment projects using prefabricated, factory-made components. So, while the US built Levittowns, France prioritized huge housing complexes erected on the suburban fringes of Paris and other major cities.

A key reason for this difference lay in the weighty, but divergent, roles played by the state in the two countries. That divergence reflected the contrasting forms of capitalism dominant in each country after the war: the US government nudged the marketplace indirectly; the French government shaped it through nationalizations, planning, and other forms of direct involvement. In postwar homebuilding, the US largely abandoned publicly funded housing projects and instead offered mortgage insurance and other incentives to banks, individual consumers, and developers like Levitt who erected tens of thousands of dwellings and became exceptionally wealthy as a result. [4]

Levitt and his imitators built suburban developments rather than urban housing partly because the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created under Roosevelt's New Deal, refused to insure loans in many urban areas, especially those inhabited by African Americans. The FHA favored single-family homes and considered it unacceptably risky to jumble together "inharmonious racial or nationality groups." [5] These policies ensured that almost all postwar homebuilding took place in suburban areas open to white people only.

The Grand Ensemble: Solution to France's Postwar Housing Crisis?

France's racial injustices mostly meant that in the face of a dire postwar housing shortage, people of color were more likely than whites to be homeless or relegated to squalid shanty towns in the no-man's-land surrounding Paris. When French officials finally turned to homebuilding in the mid-1950s–infrastructure repair had come first – they explicitly rejected single-family homes, viewing them through the lens of prewar *lotissements défectueux*. These were tangles of shoddy one-family structures haphazardly built by working people on the urban fringe. [6] In rejecting the single-family home, key French elites channeled the modernism of Le Corbusier and also the socialist-inspired idea that workers should be renters rather than owners of single-family homes, for fear that homeownership would make them "petty-bourgeois." [7] Levitt agreed with this assessment, though from the opposite political perspective, seeing homeownership as a bulwark against communism.

So, France's Ministry of Reconstruction and Urbanism planned large apartment complexes and selected the engineering firms to build them. The results took the form of huge concrete structures shaped into blocks and slabs. The ultimate example of this approach was the *chemin de grue*, a construction system that used cranes mounted on railroad tracks to stack identical prefabricated apartment units next to, and on top of, one another along the length of the tracks. The result was long, narrow structures that seemed built from huge, hollow Legos. [8]

The government officials, engineers, and architects who designed and built these projects, along with the social scientists who endorsed them, not only expressed pride in these developments but also praised them as a means to engineer better lives. As the architect Marcel Lods put it, the designers' goal was "to teach French people how to live." [9] Although most of their projects were aesthetically grim, taken together, they proved wildly successful as government policy. The number of French housing units grew by 61 percent and featured the basic amenities – running water, toilets, bathtub, or shower – that most prewar dwellings had lacked.

This was a major achievement, but residents of the grands ensembles quickly took their new amenities for granted and began to focus on the downsides of their accommodations. They were ugly, monotonous, noisy, and crowded, packing so many people into close quarters that privacy seemed lost. And the projects

got worse as time went on. At first, the apartment towers and medium-rise slabs were surrounded by ample greenspace, which made the stark concrete exteriors less oppressive. One architect, Emile Aillaud, injected a bit of whimsy into the grands ensembles with his La Grande Borne project, a series of low-rise curvaceous structures that undulated around courtyards filled with greenery. But as more projects went up, greenspaces became limited, which left little room for ballfields and playgrounds.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/i16285324/construction-de-la-grande-borne

"La construction de la Grande Borne", *L'invité du dimanche*, June, 15, 1969

Source: INA

Residents began to gripe publicly, and journalists took up their complaints with a vengeance, especially in the case of Sarcelles. A multitude of writers trashed the massive, 50,000-person development as a "vertigo of technology," a "human silo," a "termite heap," and a "dormitory city." In *Vivre à Sarcelles*, Jean Duquesne was especially hyperbolic, condemning the project as "This great barracks, this concentration camp where we are locked in rabbit cages." [10] Psychologists invented a mental condition called "Sarcellitis," said mainly to affect women, who became listless and depressed in their new abodes. "You visit them at five in the afternoon," wrote one critic, "and the beds aren't made."

In 1961, the prize-winning writer Christiane Rochefort published a novel, *Les petits enfants du* siècle, whose adolescent narrator Josyane comments ironically on the projects' monotonous life and the phony government hype touting them. "This was Project, this was the real Project of the Future! Buildings and buildings and buildings for miles and miles and miles. All alike. In rows. White. And more buildings. Buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings buildings. Buildings. Buildings." [11]

Meeting Modernity Halfway

Despite this criticism, and the French public's oft-stated penchant for single-family houses, government officials argued until the 1970s that their citizens were better-off in grands ensembles whatever their stated views. A counter-current of opinion surfaced, however, as soon as the first housing blocks went up. One of the earliest of these alternative voices was Raymond Berrurier, the ambitious, energetic mayor of Le Mesnil Saint-Denis, a tiny village of 1,000 souls twelve miles southwest of Versailles. Berrurier hated the grands ensembles and the burgeoning *villes nouvelles* surrounding Paris. He fiercely championed rural communes like his own, whose very existence he believed to be under threat, as he put it, from the "disorderly and monstruous growth of cities that overwhelm and crush the individuals packed into barracks ten, fifteen, twenty stories high." [12] Despite his apocalyptic language, Berrurier realized that to protect his village and keep it vital, he would have to meet modernity halfway by mass producing single-family houses and low-rise apartments according to a coherent master plan.

Berrurier's commune lacked the resources to do this on its own, and learning of Levitt's arrival in Paris in 1962, he wrote the American a long, rambling letter, urging him to help. "We don't want simply to build houses," Berrurier told the American homebuilder. Our goal is to "create a … [community] in which people can be happy because they have [the ability to alternate between solitude and social contact]." [13] To achieve the twin objectives of isolation and togetherness, individuality and community, Berrurier wrote, people

needed separate homes of their own and also common facilities like swimming pools and tennis courts. This was exactly this kind of community that Levitt had built in the United States and wanted to create in France.

Levitt responded enthusiastically, and in September 1963 bought all 61 hectares (150 acres) of Le Mesnil's unbuilt land, which had once belonged to the local, eighteenth-century chateau. Levitt promised to create a development acceptable to the mayor, which meant structures supported by cement rather than wood and Ile-de-France architectural accents on the roofs and facades. [14] Levitt named his development Les Résidences du Château, and five model homes went on display in October 1965. As with the US Levittowns, they were besieged by potential buyers. *Time* magazine reported that some "60,000 Frenchmen poured out of Paris to gape at Levitt's recently opened American-style subdivision in suburban Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis." [15] Altogether, there would be 600 dwellings (including 5 small apartment buildings of twelve units each), most of which were sold before a single one was built.



An advertisement for the Levitt residential development in Mesnil Saint-Denis, *Le Monde*, 30 septembre 1966

Source: Le Monde

Despite the rapid sales, Levitt advertised heavily in *Le Monde* and other major papers. His publicity campaign linked the Résidences du Château to the noble chateaus of the past and to the surrounding forests, where "once upon a time, the Kings of France hunted undisturbed." The Levitt homes, the ads maintained, were "real residences in all their nobility. Not housing blocks, but separate domains surrounded by gardens that extend into the forest close by." [16]

In 1966, when this initial Levitt development opened, the French government still officially backed the building of grands ensembles rather than single-family homes. But this policy was facing growing resistance, as public opinion polls continued to show that most French people still wanted their own detached homes. This was especially true of those who lived in grands ensembles, 82 percent of whom said they preferred a single-family home. [17] Although only middle-class and upper middle-class people could afford the Levitt houses, working class people aspired to them as well.

Home Sweet Home

This preference moved a team of French sociologists led by Henri Raymond and Nicole Haumont to try to understand the French public's broad, persistent desire for detached single-family homes. No longer, Raymond and Haumont said, should social scientists dismiss that desire as an anachronistic remnant from the past or, worse, a manifestation of petty bourgeois false consciousness that needed to be overcome. [18]

What Raymond and Haumont found above all in their interviews was the widespread belief that the detached, single-family dwelling, unlike a rented apartment, gave people the ability to "appropriate" their living space, as Henri Lefebvre put it in his preface to the book. By "appropriate," he meant the ability to shape space according to one's needs and desires and in a way that gives people a sense of security denied to non-owners. This sense of security often moved homeowners to play down the burden of mortgage payments, taxes, long commutes, and maintenance costs, making people's attachment to the detached home, the sociologists said, a form of "utopian" thinking.

Perhaps the most important advantage attributed to living in a single-family home was its perceived status as a haven from an often jarring outside world. At home, you were *chez-soi*, autonomous and free in a space you controlled. At work, others were in control, and in an apartment building, you had to obey the rules and regulations of a more collective life. "When I come home," said one interviewee, "I cry with joy to be in my own place with all my things." [19]

Raymond and Haumont did their interviews in 1965 and published the results in 1967, a year after the birth of Les Residences du Chateau. Their book has never been out of print. Even before it came out, officials in the ministry of Infrastructure got its message, and they followed Levitt's Le Mesnil project closely, highlighting its character as a planned community, "perfectly well thought out." [20] The building trades magazine *Tuiles et Briques* echoed this positive assessment and concluded that the Levitt "formula of grouping individual houses" in a planned community, an approach largely unknown in France, "should be able to adapt to the French situation" and would be "desirable." [21] The "French situation" was grounded in planning, though not yet the planning of maisons individuelles, and this made Levitt's planned developments attractive.

The Architects' Dissent

France's most visible professional architects, however, vehemently disagreed. *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, a glossy magazine that touted modern design, condemned Levitt's proposed French houses as "symbols of bad taste, obsolescence, and the complete absence of any architectural qualities." [22] Undeterred by this critique, government officials, along with homebuyers, increasingly sided with Levitt. In 1966, the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure invited Levitt to contribute two houses to their "Villagexpo," a seven-week-long exhibit featuring eighty-seven single-family homes intended to display modern, cost-effective building techniques. [23]

Once again, prominent architects wanted no part of this *nouveau village* and denounced the very idea of mass-produced detached houses surrounded by grass. This kind of dwelling, they said with some justice, divided what had long been farms, forests, and open lands into small chunks of identical private spaces separate from one another and closed to the non-homeowning public. These architects didn't yet mention the environmental concerns on the horizon, but, in any case, they were swimming against the tide. By the early 1970s, more than forty Levitt-style developments dotted the landscape of suburban Paris, and the post-Gaullist French governments reoriented housing policy and subsidies away from grands ensembles and toward single-family homes. The government officially announced the end of grand ensemble building in the mid-1970s.

This dramatic change evoked, in some quarters, an almost laughably dystopian response. According to *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, "In this infinite fabric of [Levitt-style] residences utterly similar to one another, all life dies, and even boredom, too, since monotony is nothing more than one form of death." [24]

A more salient – and less dystopian – criticism, though virtually no one made it in the late 1960s and 1970s, would have been that the movement to single-family suburbs would only worsen France's residential segregation by class and race. It was mostly white, middle-class families that relocated to the Levitt-inspired exurbs of major cities. Working class people either remained in suburban HLMs or took up residence in the Villes Nouvelles. [25] And as white people abandoned the grands ensembles, people of African origins progressively moved in. Government neglect set in, and the rest of the story is too well known to rehearse here. The new inhabitants of these HLMs, like most other French people, would have preferred single-family homes.



Levitt homes in Mesnil-Saint-Denis in French advertising

But despite the persistent preference for maisons individuelles, the dystopian view of American-style suburbia elaborated in the 1950s and 60s continues to shape elite attitudes in France, which still tend to neglect the problem of racial segregation. Take, for example, Fanny Taillandier's award-winning novel of 2016*, Les États et empires du lotissement grand siècle. Archéologie d'une utopie*. [26] The book begins with a short preface identifying William Jaird Levitt as the "merchant-builder [who] transplanted into Europe and France a North American model of town planning, that of the new village." This was a housing ensemble built on "virgin land all at once" using "the principles of Fordism…adapted to Europe's modest dimensions [relative to the US]… while maintaining its physical and symbolic affinity to America's consumer society." Taillandier named her fictional version of Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis "Grand Siècle" (the Seventeenth Century) because of its proximity to Versailles, the "new village" of Louis XIV and first full-fledged suburb of Paris.



Résidences du Château Presentation Flyer

The plot unfolds in a distant post-apocalyptic future when fixed residence no longer exist, and nomads roam the Earth. The narrator is a nomad who stumbles on a long abandoned French Levitt community. He or she – we learn virtually nothing about the narrator – notes that although people hadn't lived there for eons, the dwellings were mostly intact, standing as "identical houses, one after the other, motionless and seductive."

That much of the Levitt development has survived into the post-apocalyptic future, albeit without any human inhabitants, allows the nomad-narrator to conduct an archaeological investigation of the Levitt-remains, whose results shape the rest of the text. "Rarely," the narrator declares, "have remains of the sedentary world appeared so coherent to us." This Levitt-ville, Taillandier's narrator says, represents the swan song of the "strange period in human history, which for a few centuries, was sedentary, pacific, and

consumerist." The purpose of this American style lotissement was to grow new roots for an unrooted bourgeoisie, a class freed by cars and phones and televisions to move away from the city and skip from job to job, house to house, discarding obsolete consumer goods along the way. But the project was doomed in advance. People would have to spend so much time in their cars, that their new village would turn them into quasi-nomads for much of their lives. Rather than sink new roots into virgin soil, Levitt's development portended a future in which everyone would be uprooted for good.



A dystopian portrait of Levittown: extract from *Ma vie en rose*, a film by Alain Berliner (1997)

Source: YouTube

Another dystopian portrait of a Levitt-ville, this one in Mennecy, appears in the 1997 film, *Ma vie en Rose*, a generally sensitive portrayal of a young boy who wants to be – and believes he is – a girl. This Levitt community was clearly selected to highlight the pressures of conformity and the evils of intolerance, as if these problems existed nowhere else. Much of the film's narrative is structured around backyard barbecues attended by the neighbors, and those neighbors are impressed when Hanna and Pierre's third child Ludovic struts outside in makeup and a dress – until they realize that she's a boy.

The turning point in the film comes during a school play, when Ludovic locks the girl who plays Sleeping Beauty in a bathroom and dons her costume so that Jerome, the gay neighbor boy, can kiss her awake. The audience of parents erupts, and Ludovic is kicked out of school after the neighbors organize a petition against him. Shortly afterwards, the neighbor-boss fires Ludovic's father Pierre and effectively banishes him and family from the development, as he's now unable to make his mortgage payments. Pierre finds a new, lower-paying job far away from Mennecy. Their new house is a dump, and the new neighborhood has nothing of Levitt-Mennecy's outward charm. But Ludovic meets a girl (Chris/Christine) there who is really a boy, and having been liberated from Levitt-France's hatred and intolerance, finds acceptance in the new, modest-priced town.

Some of this cultural commentary outdid even the severest American critics of Levittown, but as in the United States, the critics' influence was minimal. The house-and-yard remained, by far, the top choice of most French families, and for many of those who aspired to a single-family home, the grouping of houses in a master plan represented a desirable, or at least acceptable, modern advance – a compromise between the isolated homestead and the dense urban neighborhood.

The Legacy of Levitt

The popularity of Levitt's two Villagexpo homes, plus the hot demand in Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis, convinced him to build two more single-family developments in the Paris region – he first in Lésigny, and second in Mennecy – plus a townhouse development (maisons en bande) near Le Mesnil. The Lésigny and townhouse projects proved highly successful, but the one in Mennecy confronted the oil shock, stagflation, and recessions of the 1970s. It took nearly a decade to sell out. The slow sales there contributed to the bankruptcy of Levitt-France in 1981, which paralleled the demise of Levitt in the United States. But despite the fall of Levitt-France, the Levitt example sank deep roots in France, both as a model to emulate and a residential wasteland to reject.

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