

Living the American Way. Transfers, Hybridizations, Practices, and Cultural Adaptation of the Levitt France Model (1964-1981)

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PhD

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Summary

In 1947, Levitt and Sons inaugurated Levittown, NY, the first of a series of three suburban housing developments designed to accommodate young families of World War II veterans. Comprising 17,447 standardized and affordable single-family homes, Levittown met the fundamental needs of the American nuclear family while offering a degree of flexibility conducive to its evolution. A decade later, William Levitt, the company's leading figure, launched Belair at Bowie, a more modest project that nevertheless reflected the middle class's growing aspirations for comfort and personalization. In 1964, the company initiated its European expansion with the Résidences du Château in Le Mesnil-Saint-Denis, adapting the American model to the French context.

Levitt France also established developments in Lésigny, Élancourt, and Mennecy, although these projects fell well short of William Levitt's initial ambitions, which had envisioned a scale of production comparable to that achieved in the United States. Despite immediate commercial success, the French subsidiary built only around 5,000 homes before filing for bankruptcy in 1981. Nevertheless, Levitt's impact on the French suburban landscape proved lasting: his model inspired a generation of developer-builders such as Kaufman & Broad and Bréguet, who adapted and disseminated these architectural and urban principles on a large scale, elevating the American suburban home to a key reference point.

Through a methodology combining fieldwork inspired by the principles of the *Inventaire général du patrimoine culturel*, the creation of oral history archives, and the production of an original photographic corpus, this dissertation seeks to reconstruct and enhance the value of the numerous but scattered archives – whether housed in public institutions or, more often, held by private individuals – available in physical or digital form, frequently circulated online but rarely catalogued, that document the development of new suburban villages in France.

This research explores the historical and cultural dynamics that shaped the emergence and dissemination of the « Levitt model » in France. It situates this phenomenon within a long-term genealogy and analyzes planning policies combining strong state intervention with the liberalization of individual homeownership. Through a comparative approach between France and the United States, the study demonstrates how the American Cape Cod came to supplant the « rational cottage » as the dominant archetype of the single-family house in French suburban landscapes (Eleb & Engrand, 2020). Finally, this work challenges the common idea that French suburban architecture is an « architecture without architects » by revealing the conceptual and formal qualities of these developments. It expands the corpus of twentieth-century architects and landscape designers – such as Roger Anger and Jacques Sgard – while also bringing attention to forgotten figures like Liliane Véder and lesser-known ones like Alain Cornet-Vernet. Moreover, it explores the enduring presence of the suburban ideal in contemporary imaginaries.

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