

BY TIM HEALEY



To increase production speed, Levitt and Sons used slab-on-grade construction. At the height of its productivity, the company erected one house every 16 minutes—which became part of its sales pitch. By 1951, 17,447 homes had been constructed. No under-slab insulation or vapor barriers were installed, and the copper piping used for the hydronic radiant heat corroded fairly quickly (leaks often went unnoticed, soaking into the ground). Many homeowners abandoned their heating system within 15 to 20 years.

Levittown's 'Cellarless' Homes

On May 27, 1947, a town board meeting was held in Hempstead, New York, on Long Island. First up on the agenda was a request to repeal section 809 in Article 8 of the local building code, which required that all homes be built with basements. Debate on whether to allow the building of “cellarless” homes lasted a little more than 20 minutes. The code amendment was approved, most of the attendees exited the small meeting room, and the town board carried on with Hempstead’s affairs.

What seemed to be a simple amendment changed the face of building in America. It allowed the first 2,000 homes (of an eventual 17,441 total) to be built in the town later named “Levittown.”

HOMES WITHOUT CELLARS AND WITH ‘RADIATION’ HEATING

Berni Fisher, a beat writer for *Newsday* (the local paper of record) painted a more colorful picture of the meeting. In his story on May 28, 1947, Fisher wrote, “New hope lights the faces of those (some desperate for homes) who heard Hempstead Town Board change the zoning laws to permit building of homes without cellars and with radiation heating. Interested spectators crowded into the room where the hearing was held, and overflowed into the hall and down the stairs.” Fisher added, “Scores of veterans and families were among the record throng of 800 who attended the public hearing.”

Fisher went on to report that developer William Levitt, of Levitt and Sons, told the board that “he sought an amendment for the sake

of speed.” Fisher quoted Levitt as saying, “Building cellars would not affect the cost of this project, but under the present building conditions it would take three to four years to complete this number of houses.” Levitt wanted to finish 2,000 homes within a year. His attorney, Ira Goldman, pointed out that “noted architects and engineers have approved this type of basementless construction,” in an apparent nod to Frank Lloyd Wright’s passion for using radiant slabs.

Fisher reported that in response to presiding supervisor A. Holly Patterson’s probing on whether this type of building would sacrifice the desirability and quality of the homes, Levitt said, “This is the best construction we have done in 20 years.” Levitt had honed his production skills building slab-based housing during the war.

WE WANT THE HOUSES!

The attendees began to sound off: “Cellar or no cellar doesn’t mean anything to me or anyone else here. We want the houses!” and “No cellar beats one room in an attic where you freeze to death for \$45 a month.” Next, according to Fisher, Patterson assured everyone that the board intended to cooperate with builders in Nassau County, N.Y., and insisted that the board was “primarily interested in seeing that the townspeople get fine livable homes.” Patterson then declared a motion to repeal section 809, and so it passed.

Tim Healey is a senior editor at JLC.

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