Entrepreneurial Vernacular: Developers' Subdivisions in the 1920s. *By Carolyn S. Loeb*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xvi + 273 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, $45. ISBN 0-801-86618-9.

Reviewed by Richard Guy Wilson

The development of the American penchant for suburban housing has received some treatment from historians. Most of their focus has been on layout and planning, model houses, housing reform, and architecture. The treatment in many cases has been broad and generalized, and they frequently rely on homemaker magazines and house-plan and pattern books for their source material. Specific, in-depth studies of actual subdivisions and the individuals or real-estate operators and developers who financed and built them are rare. Indeed the entire real-estate industry lacks adequate historical study. Carolyn Loeb, who teaches art history at Central Michigan University, provides an important contribution to the field and also helps to correct some of our common misperceptions.

Large-scale speculative subdivisions are usually thought of as post–World War II developments, typified by the Levitts, but, as Loeb shows, the groundwork for Levittown was laid back in the 1920s by a loose confederation of realtors or developers. Three projects are examined in some detail within the larger context of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, governmental actions, the industrialization and/or rationalization of the building process, and other elements, such as Clarence A. Perry's "neighborhood unit plan."

Loeb first presents the Ford Homes subdivision, comprising 250 houses established by Henry Ford and his Dearborn Realty & Construction Company to provide housing near the Ford plants outside Detroit. This was not factory housing, as the prices were too high for unskilled workers, but was intended for middle management. Six models in a vaguely Colonial idiom were designed by an architect, Albert Gardener Wood Jr. They were intended to be efficient, standardized, and rationalized, providing a model for realtor-developers rather than representing blueprints for reform. The construction crews were drawn from Ford employees, many of whom had not worked in

the building trades, indicating how industrialized the process had become. Housing was needed, and this approach was devised to replace piecemeal development.

Very different is the second subdivision, Brightmoor, also in the Detroit area, which was developed by B. E. Taylor in the early 1920s. By 1925 Taylor had constructed 3,958 houses that were sold for less than $2,000 and thus were available to a working-class population, many of whom had recently migrated from Appalachia and the South. No architect is recorded for Brightmoor's houses, which were bungalow in form and very efficiently constructed. Although they lacked indoor plumbing and heating, the lots provided garden space, furthering the sense of community that was generated among their inhabitants.

Westwood Highlands in San Francisco, the third subdivision described by Loeb, was laid out on hilly terrain with curvilinear streets, a product of the realty and development company of Baldwin & Howell in the mid- and later 1920s. Designed as a community with gateposts, the architect was Charles F. Strothoff, and the builder was the Nelson Brothers. Stylistically the houses were variations on Spanish colonial, and they were far more expensive than the national norm. Strothoff provided a variety of types or "modules," which provided options for a house to be enlarged and fashioned to fit different and difficult lots. A coordinated development, Westwood Highlands, was sold through extensive advertising, which emphasized that the purchaser would get both quality and standardization. The advertisements did not mention Baldwin & Howell, but of course the company controlled the entire enterprise.

A leitmotif throughout Loeb's book is the most famous realtor of the 1920s, George F. Babbitt, the namesake of Sinclair Lewis's best-selling novel of 1922. Babbitt boasts about Zenith's subdivision, Floral Heights: "There's no other country in the world that has such pleasant houses. And I don't care if they *are* standardized. It's a corking standard" (p. 1). Loeb's point is that real-estate agents had undergone a transformation; instead of being either high-risk land speculators or simply go-betweens, they were now creators of communities and the major source for new housing. This new direction is explored, as is the complex web of associations and organizations and the shifting notion of what makes a community. Community schools, for example, which were already important, now take center stage.

Loeb's writing can be a bit wooden and repetitive. Not included in her study is a consideration of who purchased the houses and how the homes fit residents' needs, but of course that would have been a far larger study, and a different one. Also the question should be asked, how representative are Loeb's three subdivisions? Are there differences from subdivisions on the East Coast or the South? But, overall, Loeb has created an important study that is a real contribution to the history of American subdivisions, housing, and real estate.

Richard Guy Wilson is Commonwealth Professor of Architectural History at the University of Virginia. He has written extensively on American and modern architecture, including The Machine Age in America, 1918–1941 *(1986*), Thomas Jefferson's Academical Village *(1993),* Richmond's Monument Avenue *(2001), and* Buildings of Virginia: Tidewater and Piedmont *(2002). A book on the Colonial Revival house is due in 2004.*