

# First and Foremost

**In the beginning...these were the earliest modern tracts ever built in the United States**

BY DAVE WEINSTEIN – CA MODERN | Winter 2022



The people behind most of the first modern tracts of postwar America were motivated less by a desire to make a profit than to achieve social goals. This was certainly true of the three developments pictured on this page. Above: Park Planned Homes in Altadena.

By the early 1950s they began popping up everywhere—tracts of homes with flat or odd-angled roofs. Not just in California, but nationwide.

Suddenly, the average middle-class home seeker could visit an open house and put down a low (or no) down payment on the type of home that—until the end of World War II—had been available only to people who were sophisticated enough to desire cutting-edge architecture and could afford to hire an architect.

The stories behind these tracts share several commonalities. The people behind most of the first modern tracts were motivated less by a desire to make a buck than to achieve social goals. And, sadly enough, the failure of some of these schemes was caused by opposition from financiers and government officials.

Opposition was sometimes motivated by racism, with financing denied to communities that were intended to be racially integrated. And financial bureaucracies often shied away from new designs and new ways of living.

Consider what may be the very first tract of modern homes in the United States—at Altadena, California, 1946. The tract's 28 compact, big-windowed houses featured hidden courtyards that suggest the atrium developer Joe Eichler would add to his designs a decade later.



Crestwood Hills in Los Angeles while under construction in the late 1940s.

The career of architect Gregory Ain, who designed and helped develop the 28 'Park Planned Homes,' shows how several streams of thought came together at the end of the war that would turn the dream of mass modern housing into reality.

Like many fellow progressive architects of the time, Ain believed society should produce good housing for all. In this view, he was part of a tradition that went back to the Wiener Werkbund, an association that called upon leading modern architects to build a community of 70 workers' homes in Vienna in 1932.

One of those architects, Richard Neutra, designed war housing in California during World War II—as did Ain. Ain's designs led to the Park Planned Homes that followed.

Among the many progressive architects who, in the 1930s, designed housing for farmworkers and, during the early 1940s, housing for defense workers was Bob Anshen, who would go on to work for Eichler, beginning in 1949.

Ain, Joe Stein, and Anshen and his partner, Steve Allen, were among many California architects who, before and during the war, had designed small, one-off custom homes they hoped would serve as models for mass housing.

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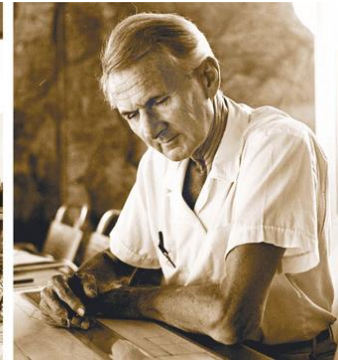
Ladera in Portola Valley, represented above by a mid-'40s advertisement promoting its cooperative housing.

Significantly, the impetus to build Park Planned Homes came not from Ain but from the homebuyers. "A group of people went to architect Gregory Ain and asked him to model a unit of houses for them in Altadena," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in December 1945, as the homes were being constructed.

It wasn't only in tracts that clusters of modern homes would be built. In New Canaan, Connecticut, after architect Philip Johnson built his now-famous Glass House in 1949, his colleagues followed, and soon the town was dotted with approximately 30 custom homes. In the early 1940s architect Marcel Breuer hoped to start a colony for modernists in Massachusetts, on Cape Cod.

As the war neared its end, planners and architects knew that new tract homes would soon carpet the landscape. The question was: How can we build not just tracts, but communities?

As the years went on, many other developers took up this charge, often with remarkable results. Among the earliest of the pioneering modern tracts are the ones profiled here.



**2 BEL VISTA**  
**Palm Springs, California**  
**Architect: Albert Frey**  
**1946: first homes sold**

Another pioneering tract was intended as a commercial venture, not as a social experiment. Builders Culver Nichols and Sallie Stevens Nicholls were prominent Palm Springs investors and developers.

But the 15-home tract was rooted in both farmworker and war worker housing. Architect Albert Frey (pictured above), who had designed farm housing for the Department of Agriculture in the 1930s, originally intended the designs for Bel Vista to house defense workers. The plan of the Bel Vista homes resembles Frey's farm housing.

The Swiss native had a history with social housing, having worked on housing projects in Belgium and with Le Corbusier in France. In 1928 Frey designed a "minimal metal house" in which, historian Joseph Rosa writes, "all of the private spaces and the kitchen spin off of the living area, eliminating the need for corridors."

Frey, who moved to New York in 1930, designed with partner A. Lawrence Kocher the 'Aluminaire' house that same year as an experiment in simple housing that could be built quickly. The Aluminaire—the name blends 'aluminum' and 'luminous'—is now owned by the Palm Springs Art Museum.

While small—1,100 square feet—the wood-framed Bel Vista homes had style, with big windows, seven doors each, and one curving concrete block wall. Each home has three bedrooms, a flat roof, and is built on a concrete slab, like so many modern tract homes that would follow.

Todd Hays, who owns the last of the homes that fully retains its architectural integrity, successfully had the home added to the National Register of Historic Places.

While the plan of each home was identical, the tract avoided monotony. Hays wrote in the National Register nomination: "The simple solution called for one single plan to be flipped, rotated, and placed with an altered setback from lot to lot."

"Eighteen different exterior finish colors were used to further differentiate the homes from one another," he wrote. Hays summarized how European modernism fed into American suburbia:

"Frey combined an International Style inspiration from his time spent in Europe and his early practice in the United States with the economic demands of postwar America to create a unique, early modern housing type both practical for the California desert and affordable to the everyday working person."



### **3 TAQUITZ RIVER ESTATES**

**Palm Springs, California**

**Architect: Allen Siple**

**1947: first homes built**

Palm Springs was a sleepy place in the mid-1940s, so it's surprising that another pioneering modernist tract popped up there.

But Los Angeles developer Paul Trousdale (1915-1990 – pictured above) was in love with the desert, and Pearl McCallum McManus, daughter of Palm Springs' first white settler, and owner of much of the town's prime real estate, was determined to make the small city a big destination. She chose Trousdale to develop the site into a planned community in south Palm Springs.

They planned a tract of homes that were aimed at anybody but the common man. The elaborate sales brochure announced, 'Home purchase is limited to invitation only.'

According to author Steven Price, Tahquitz River Estates "represented the second-home lifestyle for an elevated class of homeowner (or one who aspired to be)."

About Tahquitz River Estates, the neighborhood association writes on its website, "At the time it was the largest and most ambitious standardized housing development that had been attempted in Palm Springs and the first large postwar development by a major developer."

Trousdale Construction initially built about 230 ranch-like two- and three-bedroom, one- and two-bath homes, ranging from 1,500 to 1,700 square feet. The homes, including the model pictured above, were designed by architect Allen Siple and his associates.

The brochure promised 'eight individual styles' of homes and 18 different elevations. Each had 'an entire wall of crystal-clear glass' in the living and dining room. They had

exposed beam ceilings, breezeways between living areas and garages, and open-air 'lanais' off the living room.

White pebble roofs were provided to reflect heat. If the buyer wanted year-round desert living, air conditioners were optional. Foundations were concrete slab, and walls were of 'Tropi-Kolor cement block.'

Swimming pools were optional, and fully landscaped lots were 10,000 square feet. Landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout focused on native desert vegetation, for the most part.

But it wasn't desert flowers *House Beautiful's* influential editor Elizabeth Gordon had in mind in 1948 when she praised the neighborhood's landscape. She loved the "privacy landscaping," which made each home and lot feel like its own separate world through setbacks, artful arrangement of homes on lots, and use of varied fencing.

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