

Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House The Pursuit of Happiness

By John C. Weicher



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At the end of the movie, “Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House,” Cary Grant and Myrna Loy as Mr. and Mrs. Blandings are relaxing in their garden, and he is reading a book, the book on which the film is based: *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, by Eric Hodgins. Hodgins had been affiliated with *Fortune* since its first issue in 1930, first as an associate editor, and then as publisher, in 1937. Supposedly, everything he wrote was hysterically funny, including memos to his secretary.

In 1939 Hodgins and his wife bought a piece of land in New Milford, Connecticut. (They had two daughters, just like the Blandings did.) He planned to spend \$20,000 building a house; he actually spent \$56,000. It was an 11-room house, and it featured the first dishwasher that was manufactured for home use, and the first indirect lighting in a dining room.

New Milford is along the Connecticut – New York border, halfway up. It was not then, and is not now, part of the New York metropolitan area. Officially, it’s considered a suburb of Danbury. In the year 1940, New Milford had one household for every 25 acres. It was and still is 14 miles from the nearest commuter railroad station – in Danbury, on the New York, New Haven and Hartford railroad, although the railroad went

into its first bankruptcy in 1935, and was chronically short of money for maintenance and capital improvements.

In 1939, the typical new home in the United States – and there were not many built – cost about \$5,600. So the Hodgins family built a house that was 10 times as expensive as the typical new home of the time. To put that in context, in 2009 the typical new home sold in the US cost \$210,000. Ten times that is over \$2 million. There are so few houses at that price that the Census Bureau’s highest-price category is “\$750,000 and over,” and those homes were about 3% of all new homes built in 2009.

Hodgins sold the house two years later, and moved back to New York City. That was in 1941.

Then, he wrote a short story about it in *Fortune*, in April 1946: “Mr. Blandings Builds His Castle – the Woeful Tale of a Man Who Started out to Build a House and Ended Up, Buffeted and Bilked, Spending Three Times What He Had Planned.”

He turned the story into a novel, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, which was also published in 1946. He said afterwards that it “wrote itself.” Then came the movie, in 1948. After that, he wrote a sequel, *Blandings Way*, which was published in 1950. It tells the story of what happened after the house was built. It has very different characters, both in New York and Connecticut, and a very different tone and feel. The Blandings family, like the Hodgins family, move back to New York.

That was not the end of the story for Hodgins, however. With the royalties – \$200,000, four times the cost of the house – he tried to buy it back, but the owner wouldn’t sell. So maybe there would have been a third book, about moving back to the country, again.

The house is still standing, or at least it was as of last December 16. You can see it on the website of the [Waterbury Republican-American](#). In 1992, it was occupied by a Broadway musical composer and his wife, who wrote celebrity biographies, and it was apparently something of a local tourist attraction. They said it was phenomenally well built, and soundproof – she never heard him working. It was sold in 2004 for \$1.2 million – about 20 times what it cost to build.

For that matter, the house from the movie is still standing, in Malibu Creek State Park, near Los Angeles. And for good measure, as a publicity stunt the studio built 73 replicas around the country and raffled them off. One was near Toledo, Ohio, and in 2007 the *Toledo Blade* wrote a story about it. The current owner, who had no idea of its history, said that house was exceptionally well built, also – so well built it was hard to make alterations. The house was 59 years old at the time.

This movie is about the pursuit of happiness, in a different way than the previous three in this film series. The Blandings family was very nearly literally *pursuing* happiness, going to find it in a different place. They were not seeking money or wealth; Mr. Blandings’ annual salary was almost five times the median family income of the

time. As of 2008, the median family income in the United States was about \$61,000; five times that would be about \$300,000. Mr. Blandings is described and describes himself as “middle class,” but today he would be considered a “millionaire,” at least in tax policy discussions, because he makes over \$250,000.

The Blandings family, like the Hodgins family, built a huge house a long way out in the country. They were not even living in suburbia; they were in “exurbia,” in the jargon of urban social scientists, 70 miles from midtown Manhattan. They went from one extreme to the other, moving from the most densely populated place in America.

But millions of people were doing the same thing, much more modestly. Like the Blandings family, they had some money, and they were trying to decide how to spend it in the pursuit of happiness, and they made a similar decision.

The beginnings of suburbanization can be traced to the mid-1840s, with the first mass transit in the form of the horse-drawn streetcar. But suburbanization went into high gear at the end of World War II. One major reason was that there was a housing shortage, a very real one; very little housing was built during the Great Depression, very little during World War II for other reasons. By the end of the war, the peak year for new home construction was almost 20 years in the past, in 1926. People had earned good money during the war, and they had had limited ways to spend it, with rationing and the diversion of resources to war production. There were quite a few movies about the housing shortage in the later 1940s – unpretentious films for the most part, such as “Miss Grant Takes Richmond,” with William Holden (the year before he again became a star in “Sunset Boulevard”) and Lucille Ball (the year before “I Love Lucy”), for example, or “Apartment for Peggy,” with William Holden again and Jeanne Crain (the year before she starred in “A Letter to Three Wives” and received an Oscar nomination for “Pinky”). And the housing shortage figures in the conclusion of “The Best Years of Our Lives,” and “Miracle on 34th Street.”

People had money, and they wanted “a home of their own.” This was the era of Levittowns. Land was inexpensive, houses were not very expensive, property taxes were low, and public services were decent – often better than in the city. (The Blandings daughters went to a fancy private school in Manhattan; it’s not clear where they went in Connecticut, but the real estate agent mentions the new high school being built, and they seem pleased. Certainly they aren’t joining their father on his daily 5 a.m. commute to Manhattan. Saving on private school tuition would have helped the Blandings handle the mortgage.)

And there was room. That was probably the most important factor. In 1960, there was a Ford Foundation study of the New York metropolitan area (not including New Milford or anyplace like the movie’s “Lansdale County”) – *Anatomy of a Metropolis*, by two distinguished economists. The study is all about suburbanization; the first chapter is called, “The Search for Space.”

This is very much a New York City movie – a Manhattan movie. It starts with Mr. Blandings’ best friend proclaiming, “Manhattan!” [fanfare] “New York!” [another fanfare] “U.S.A!” [third fanfare], followed by pictures of huge buildings and crowded streets and subways. In Manhattan, most people lived in very large apartment buildings, the executive as well as the clock-puncher. This was unique in America. In 1950, over 90 percent of Manhattan residents lived in apartment buildings. More than half lived in buildings with at least 20 apartments. The same thing was true in the Bronx. Nationally, more than half the buildings with at least 20 apartments were in New York City. In Chicago – the “Second City” – apartment buildings were typically much smaller, a two-flat, three-flat, or six-flat (the latter being three stories high, having a central entrance and stairway, with two apartments on a floor, each on opposite sides of the central stairway). Boston was like Chicago; the typical residential building was a “three-decker.” In Philadelphia, the third largest city, two-thirds of the families lived in houses, mostly row houses; the same was true in Baltimore. In Detroit, the fourth largest city, most of the housing consisted of single-family detached homes. In Washington, most of the rental housing was in buildings with one to six housing units.

Also, virtually everyone in Manhattan was a renter – over 98 percent. In New York City as a whole, renters constituted 85 percent. In the other cities, at least 25 percent were owners; in Philadelphia and Detroit, more than half were.

There was certainly more space in all of these cities than there was in New York – but not enough. People in all of them and every other city were moving to the suburbs. There was a Levittown near Philadelphia as well as near New York. Responding to this change, the Census Bureau first used the word “suburbs” in the 1950 Census of Population. In 1940, it simply referred to “urban” and “rural.” (The word itself goes back at least to Shakespeare, in *Measure for Measure*.)

By 1960, almost half of the “urban” population lived in suburbs. By 1970, over half did. And suburbanization has continued ever since. Despite a number of economic and social changes that were widely expected to bring it to a halt: the two oil embargoes of 1973 and 1979, raising the cost of commuting; the trend to smaller families, especially after the development of the Pill, which might have led people to favor smaller houses and smaller yards; the growth of two-earner couples, more or less doubling the amount of commuting, and making it more of a chore to maintain a large house and yard; the sheer congestion of commuting.

By 2000, suburban residents were over 70 percent of the urban population, and over half of the total US population, about 54 percent.

With the housing market collapse of the last few years, we often read that “renting is coming back.” But the National Association of Home Builders still talks about “the American Dream,” meaning “a home of your own.” I think they are more accurate than the major media. The subprime mortgage market existed in part precisely because people wanted a home of their own, even though they didn’t qualify under the standards for

conventional “prime” mortgages. For the last several decades, it’s been a news story of the man-bites-dog variety when a family moves back into the city.

Have people found happiness in the suburbs? They seemed to think so in 1948, and the statistics say they still do.

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