



Loving Lustrons

Like the Edsel or New Coke, all-steel Lustron houses were a marketing idea that never fully caught on. Yet nearly 60 years after their brief run, a community of Lustron aficionados is working to save these distinct and quirky buildings.

By Kim A. O'Connell



It's

early on a hot morning in May 2006, and Frank Phillips is already cursing. Standing inside a nearly gutted house in Arlington, Va., sweat darkening his long hair and white T-shirt, he casts a weary glance at the wall frames and ceiling panels yet to be dismantled. For three weeks, Phillips and his colleagues from Capstone Properties, a local construction firm, have been systematically disassembling the structure so it can be stored and reassembled later. I'm there as a board member of the Arlington Heritage Alliance (AHA), a volunteer group, to document the day's progress in a logbook. AHA had placed the house and a half-dozen others like it on its annual most-endangered list two years running, and we had supported the disassembly as part of a long effort to save the dwelling from demolition.

It hasn't been easy. The crew had taken the manual used to erect the house in 1949 and worked backward, but it didn't account for such unexpected issues as rust and asbestos. Looping a facemask over my ears, I step carefully around the piles of fiberglass insulation and loose screws on the floor to join Phillips in what was once the living room. Pointing toward the roof, he

Opposite: Lustron advertisements portrayed an efficient and happy home life; bottom center: Two real residents play in the snow. Top: five of the endangered Lustrons at Quantico Marine Corps Base, Va.

notes that it has taken multiple cans of WD-40 to loosen the dozens of rusty screws and wing nuts holding the cement board asbestos panels in place. "This [bleep] fights you every step of the way," he says. "These houses were definitely overconstructed. They were built to be tornado proof."

The object of this determined toil was a Lustron. Called "the house America's been waiting for," Lustrons were prefabricated, porcelain-enameled steel residences manufactured after World War II to house returning veterans, government workers, and middle-class families. For a brief shining moment, the weather-resistant, vermin-proof, virtually maintenance-free houses caused a national sensation that captivated booming families and reached all the way to Capitol Hill. Lustrons were built in at least 32 states and the District of Columbia. Yet the company that produced them erected fewer than 3,000 before declaring bankruptcy in 1950. Today, the small two- and three-bedroom houses have become teardown targets, and only 1,200 to 1,500 are thought to remain, in various states of preservation. In Arlington, Lustrons have been demolished with astonishing rapidity. Just this April, a developer leveled a blue-and-yellow model, allowing no time for anyone to rescue it. Only four of the county's original 11 Lustrons remain intact.

"Lustrons are no more vulnerable to destruction than any other small cottage, bungalow, or ranch house," says Tom Fettes, author of *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment* (one of only two books on the subject, the



Each Lustron house was shipped to the assembly site complete on one truck.

other being Douglas Knerr's *Suburban Steel: The Magnificent Failure of the Lustron Corporation*). "While it might appear these houses are singled out, they are merely another victim of the trend to build the bigger houses in demand in some areas."

As the Lustrons disappear, however, a loose community of homeowners and recent-past buffs has increasingly worked to promote and preserve these metal marvels. Owners register their houses on Lustron websites and share information on a Yahoo! message board. Organizations like the National Trust and the Recent Past Preservation Network tout Lustron preservation. In Columbia, Mo., for example, the Boone County Historical Society recently disassembled the county's only known Lustron, possibly to be included in a historic village. The Whitehall His-

torical Society in Ohio relocated a Lustron that will serve as both the society's office and a museum. And the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana has been engaged in a disassembly and preservation project for a Lustron at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Several states, including Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, New Jersey, and South Dakota, have added their Lustrons to the National Register of Historic Places.

In Arlington, Clifford M. Krowne bought a nearly mint-condition gray Lustron in 2005 and offered to donate it to the county if it could be moved off the lot so that he could build another house there. Arlington County accepted the donation in April 2006, authorizing funds to deconstruct and store the house while government and local partners sought a new location and public use. It had taken nearly a year of meetings and hearings—including one in which a protester argued that the Lustron was not historic because no founding father had ever slept there—before county leaders would take even this intermediate step. "It was a huge thing to convince them this was worth doing," says Cynthia Liccese-Torres, Arlington's preservation planner. "County planners are still trying to come up with a new use and location in Arlington to rebuild the house for public benefit. When the house was threatened, we knew we had to take it immediately, to save it for later. It was now or never."

The Internet is a vital conduit for Lustron buffs to communicate through message boards and amateur sites, but available information is often uneven or incomplete. To remedy this, the National Trust will launch a much-anticipated website on Lustrons this July. Led by the Trust's Midwest field office, the site is meant to be a comprehensive and credible source of information, including Lustron history, technical data for homeowners, repair instructions and demonstrations, a photo library, and on-line manuals.

"Just like the Lustron truck came with all the pieces you needed to put together the house," says Jeanne Lambin, a program officer in the Wisconsin field office, "this website will give owners and people who care about Lustrons all the tools they need to preserve these houses." Perhaps most fascinating is the site's Google Map-linked database of known Lustrons. Visitors can enter search terms and be linked to the location of a house and data on its particular model, color, National Register status, and threats or known alterations.

Access the website at www.lustronpreservation.org.

➤ *It is a great irony* that the 1933 Chicago World's Fair—whose theme was "A Century of Progress"—took place during the worst economic crisis the nation had ever known. Seeking refuge from the hardships of the Great Depression, attendees lined up to view the fair's Homes of Tomorrow exhibition, which included the all-metal ARMCO-Ferro house. Made entirely of porcelain-enameled steel—the same durable material used for appliances—the house was touted as a model for factory-produced housing. Influenced by the International

The enameled-steel panels were affixed to a steel frame atop a concrete slab.



Style, many architects were embracing the modernist aesthetic and the maxim that the house, as Le Corbusier famously put it, was a “machine for living.”

Against this backdrop, Carl Strandlund, a Swedish-born entrepreneur, saw an opportunity. As an executive with the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Co., which had perfected the technique of baking porcelain enamel onto steel, Strandlund had been at the forefront of efforts to use architectural enamel for commercial buildings such as theaters, diners, and gas stations. From there, houses were no great leap. By the mid-1940s, Strandlund had formed the Lustron Corp.—named for the steel’s lustrous finish—and begun meeting with government officials to seek support for his vision of mass production. “We can have homes like Lustrons,” he said later, “because of the perfection of steel and the engineering genius which has produced a porcelain enamel ... which lends itself to beautiful architecture and lifetime durability.”

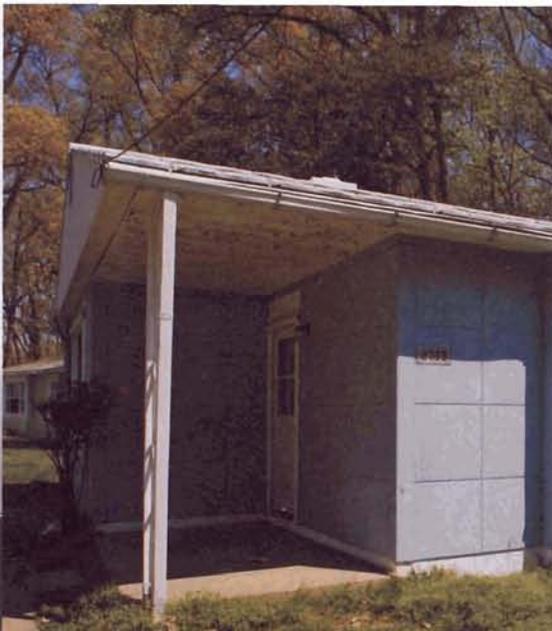
Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, the Lustron factory roared to life in September 1948. The massive former war-plane plant—large enough to contain the conveyor belts, welding rigs, sheet-metal presses, enamel sprayers, and other machines needed for the production of each house’s 3,000 parts—had a “special kind of beauty,” according to a *Fortune* magazine profile from the period. The one-story, ranch-style houses featured built-in cabinetry and appliances, including an ingenious all-in-one dishwasher/washing machine (which was often rough on the dishes). Structurally, exterior and interior enameled-steel panels were affixed to a steel skeleton set into a concrete slab foundation. Specially packed trailers transferred the parts from the factory and then served as on-site warehouses as construction by a company-sanctioned local builder proceeded.

With initial financial and political backing from the federal government, Lustrons were approved under the guaranteed mortgage program for returning veterans. Two- and three-

bedroom models offered variety in size and price, and the company gave residents a choice of four exterior colors—“surf blue,” “dove gray,” “maize yellow,” and “desert tan.” Marketing brochures emphasized the house’s streamlined efficiency and charm, with one image showing Mom—in high heels, no less—hosing down the exterior of her Lustron; another has Dad smoking a pipe with his feet up. Despite the modern materials and prefab construction, Strandlund believed the single-story ranch house design—complete with pitched roof—would complement existing neighborhoods and thereby boost sales.

Even with nearly \$40 million in federal subsidies, however, the company filled only 2,680 of the more than 20,000 orders it said it received. The reasons for its demise are debated, but historians generally contend that it was difficult to implement factory-produced homes in a decentralized housing industry that may have felt threatened by Strandlund’s singular vision. The highly engineered houses often posed problems for builders, for example, and were a tough sell for the company’s network of real estate dealers, who had to navigate building codes that often had no provisions for the Lustron’s modern design and materials. Before long, the company racked up backlogs and cost overruns, leading fiscal conservatives and consumer advocates to question whether tax dollars should continue financing what they viewed as Strandlund’s boondoggle. Politics intensified as federal financing officials pressured Strandlund to hire at least one high-level manager who could report back on the company’s problems. When the pressure proved too great, Strandlund filed for bankruptcy in June 1950.

“With all the factory jobs I had afterward, I consider Lustron the best,” says octogenarian Alex James, a former Lustron Corp. employee who often speaks and writes about his experiences. “Carl Strandlund was a great guy. He would come down on the assembly lines during coffee breaks and join us. He encouraged us and imbued within us a desire to grow and succeed with a new

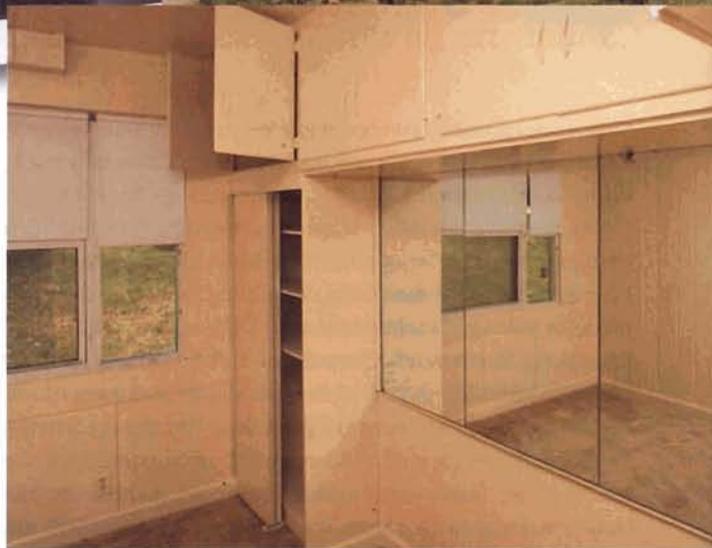


company producing an innovative product much in demand all across the country. Unfortunately for all of us, he had not foreseen the many roadblocks ahead of him."

One can acknowledge the ingenuity behind the Lustrons, but what is it like to actually live in one? To answer this question, I pay a visit to Bruce Ruble, who grew up in a Lustron in Missouri and then, in an odd twist of fate, moved into the gray Arlington Lustron after his parents purchased it for retirement and then passed away. When he got ready to sell, he was fortunate to find a buyer, Krowne, who worked to preserve the house in some fashion. In his office at Georgetown Day School in Washington, where he is a technology coordinator, Ruble and I flip through scalloped-edged black-and-white photos showing him as a child in the Missouri house. Later, as an adult, "it felt like owning an antique car to live there," he says. "I was very aware the Lustron was now historic, that it required some tinkering to keep it going."

On the Yahoo! message board, more than 750 homeowners and others post questions and offer advice on such topics as how to remove panels, replace parts, and touch up dings. "You've got a community of people spread out across the country who all share this deeply personal thing, this residence, in common," says Peter A. Rogers, who lives in a Lustron with his wife in Williamstown, Mass., and moderates the Yahoo! group. "It's one of several examples of how great the Internet has been in terms of establishing and sustaining this wide-ranging community."

Lustron buffs are invariably earnest and occasionally a little eccentric, something they're proud of. This June, 150 or so of them planned to convene for a one-day conference in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, cochaired by Don Janda, a passionate Lustron owner who has appointed his home with period-appropriate 1950s furniture. Leonardo, a single-named folk musician from Indiana, has even recorded an album titled *Lustron*. In a guitar



ditty called "Lustron Home Blues," Leonardo lauds the company's visionary: "Hey Mr. Strandlund/You were one heckuva guy/The world beat you down/But not what you left behind/Like the Pyramids or the Great, Great Wall/The Lustron Home ain't never gonna fall."

If only that were true.

➤ **On a cool morning** in April, I join Cynthia Liccese-Torres and her boss, Michael Leventhal (coordinator of Arlington's preservation program), on a tour through the Marine Corps Base at Quantico, Va., situated along the Potomac River 35 miles south of Washington. We're here to meet with Mike Dowling, a development executive with Clark Realty Capital, Inc., in charge of the disposition of 35 of the base's 37 remaining Lustrons. In 1948, the U.S. Navy approved 60 of them at Quantico—the largest quantity built in any one location. Since 2003, however, the base has begun to replace its old housing, including the Lustrons. Rather than demolish the houses outright last year, the base offered them free for the taking, as long as applicants paid



Left: advertisement showing a Lustron bedroom. Below: similar room in a Quantico house (right)

for their removal. But Clark Realty received no viable proposals, and 23 houses were razed. Dowling is now sifting through a handful of proposals for the remaining houses, which need to come down or be moved before this fall.

Reading about Quantico's Lustrons, I had wondered whether they would seem sterile or depressing grouped together on a military installation. After all, these are old buildings that have served as temporary housing for countless families. Yet as we navi-

gate past budding trees, a verdant golf course, and attractive colonial-style buildings, I am surprised at how scenic the base is. Then, in the wooded Argonne Hills neighborhood, they appear—a profusion of pastel Lustrons. The original enamel was painted over in a recent renovation, so the houses are now shades of cornflower blue, mint green, and salmon pink. Lustrons frame the main road, ring a cul-de-sac, and in one section line up like soldiers with their short ends facing the street. Although the interiors have suffered from a 1980s update, I find them utterly beguiling in their simplicity, especially in contrast to the nearby cramped townhouses that Leventhal calls “rabbit warrens.”

Later, we stop by the Geiger Ridge neighborhood, site of the 23 Lustrons lost last year. Aside from two saved here for reuse as offices and as reminders of their role in base history, the neighborhood is abuzz with new construction, as larger, traditionally designed houses rise in a dense, ostensibly New Urbanist fashion. We park at one partially finished house and look inside. It's spacious and light-filled, perfect for a young military family. Despite the vinyl siding and predictable layout, I imagine the front-porch columns offering a welcoming Old Dominion feel to a Marine just transferred from who-knows-where. But I can't help thinking that Strandlund would have been offended.

Clark Realty has been extraordinarily patient in its efforts to give away the Quantico Lustrons, extending the deadline for proposals more than once. “We don't want to demolish them,” Dowling says. “I'm confident that we're on the verge of a solution, and I'm trying to facilitate that however I can.” AHA, for its part, has joined with the Arlington County preservation program, the National Trust, the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, and the Recent Past Preservation Network in a proposal to salvage the Quantico Lustrons—except any that might be moved in toto—and distribute pieces to homeowners

who need them. Peter Rogers and Steve McLoughlin (who worked with Ohio's Whitehall Historical Society on their Lustron project) have submitted a similar proposal, and it's probable that all the groups will end up working together.

“Lustron is such a fascinating story,” says Shannon Davis, former chair of AHA and a founder of the Recent Past Preservation Network. “With Quantico, we felt that here, right in our back yard, is a fabulous concentration of this distinctive and rare building type. We thought that we could lend our developing expertise to other similar organizations.”

Most of those involved in these proposals would likely agree, however, that salvage isn't ideal preservation. Despite my AHA involvement, I am secretly pleased when I hear of a late-breaking proposal from Ginger Collier, an investor working with IBuy Inc., a Houston development company, to disassemble some or all of the Lustrons and move them to hurricane-ravaged Louisiana. Many hurdles remain, but Collier seems determined. “If we miss this chance,” she says, “we miss it forever.”

▷ *Sixty years after* Carl Strandlund envisioned a humble but sturdy factory-produced abode for average Americans, prefabricated housing is making a comeback. Again and again, I hear the comment that Lustrons were ahead of their time. The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for one, will stage an exhibition next summer on the history and current state of prefabricated housing, and museum officials are considering how Lustron fits into that story.

“Lustron was the first prefabricated building with a modernist aesthetic,” says Peter Christensen, a curatorial assistant with MoMA, “as opposed to Sears, which was trying to replicate tradition [with its catalog kit houses]. Lustron was relatively machinelike and appropriated materials used for gas stations and other facilities and used them for houses. It was a great moment in history where prefab and the machine aesthetic were married.”

Lustrons offer a snapshot of America as it must have thought of itself in 1950—sleek, modern, and strong, flush with victory, ahead of the technological curve, and yet concerned with the common man. In the metallic reflection of a Lustron, we can also glimpse how our ideals have changed, for better or worse, in half a century. There is something strangely appealing, maybe even comforting, about the cold steel of a Lustron house, staving off wind, rain, and vermin—and maybe 21st-century sprawl, excess, and suburban banality, too. “Our preservation efforts really gain motivation from the rich, multilayered nature of the Lustron story,” Peter Rogers says. “It's as if we're all carrying on, in our own historical moment, the dreams and challenges that defined Lustron back in Carl Strandlund's day. And so the saga continues.”

Kim A. O'Connell is a writer based in Arlington, Va.