

Henry J. Kaiser, postwar housing visionary

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Kaiser Community Homes, Santa Clara-San Jose (Calif), circa 1947. In previous blogs we have looked at [Kaiser Community Homes](#), Henry J. Kaiser's partnership with Southern California housing developer Fritz Burns. Here we let Kaiser express, in his own words, his vision behind this bold project.

The 1944 speech was published in the beautiful [handmade book](#) *Twenty-Six Addresses Delivered during the War Years*, but it's important to know that he was already thinking about this a year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. And in a previously unpublished 1945 speech in San Francisco, a city currently experiencing a housing crisis of a different sort, he announced the formation of KCH. It's impressive that a major developer would express such concern for aesthetics, social benefit, and affordability.

There was even the idea of linking KCH home ownership to discounted membership in the Permanente Foundation Health Plan. This was proposed in an unpublished 1946 Kaiser report about expanding hospitals in the Los Angeles area, but it was never implemented:

Occupants of the Kaiser Community Homes are another potential membership source. On this basis the Health Plan would be sold along with the house. This could be optional or mandatory and sales or collection costs of the Health Plan (approximately 15%) would be eliminated, thus making the payments more attractive to the buyer.

Unfortunately, despite an ambitious start (5,319 homes in the Los Angeles area alone), KCH didn't achieve the momentum that Kaiser had hoped for. The housing shortage turned out to be less than anticipated, prefabricated construction was less efficient than hoped for, and by 1948 West Coast based KCH was surpassed by the Levitt brothers, East Coast competitor developers whose Levittowns became the postwar planned community standard.

Below are three iterations of Henry J. Kaiser's views on postwar housing.



Kaiser community home drop cap, from "Twenty-Six Addresses" **Kaiser is back ?**

Post-War Plan Will Not Harm War Effort,"

San Francisco Chronicle, December 11, 1942

"We've got millions of new homes to build after the war. What kind of homes? What will they look like? How will they be built? We've got to sit down and figure that out ? and start doing it right now."

He described one type of housing "of particular interest to us" ? a prefabricated steel house, three rooms, fully furnished and equipped with all sanitary and disposal facilities. It can be erected by eight men in one day and would cost \$1,500 completely furnished. It can be moved readily to new locations and set up again with ease.



"You like pre-fabbed cars ? why not houses?" illustration by Emmy Lou Packard, *Fore ?n'* Aft 3/9/1945.

"Building the future: An address before the Conference of the National Committee on Housing, Chicago, Illinois," March 9, 1944 (excerpts)

Prefabricated houses might provide as little as five per cent of the total during the first five

years of peace. But prefabricated units are a different story. In the *Ladies Home Journal* for January of this year, Richard Pratt, the architectural editor, gives us a stirring preview of the possibilities: a bathroom "completely prebuilt and equipped, would come ready to be fitted into its preplanned space and be fully connected within an hour." Such a room, cast almost in one piece out of plastic, is no idle dream. From what we know about economies of mass production, it is reasonable to suppose that the cost would be one-half, or even less, that of present installations...The prefabricated unit will enjoy an immense popularity, and the economies will be substantial.

Furthermore, there shall be no repetition of that drab similarity which characterized the unhappy period when our forebears built block after block of shelters which had no more individuality than dread monotony. Today our architects, city planners, and builders are not only ready, but eager, to build for beauty, as well as utility.

Profits, as important as they are in an independent economy, must be secondary to that degree of social vision which will provide a vast volume of employment for the huge army of men who are skilled in the building arts. Such vision would grasp those things, which are in the realm of possibility, and even presume to recognize the good in human nature, rather than to emphasize its selfishness.

Modern American advertising, with its genius for eliciting responses to direct consumer appeals, could separate fact from fancy. But let us in such advertising be scrupulously honest with the American people...Many people in their eagerness to have new homes seem to forget that the cost of the dwelling does not include the cost of land and utilities; nor does it include taxes and upkeep. Perhaps if we hammered such points home, we could save a lot of foreclosures, in which everyone loses.



Kaiser Community Homes assembly line operated by Fritz Burns, Manchester Blvd, Los Angeles, circa 1946. **Remarks at press conference announcing the formation of Kaiser Community Homes, San Francisco City Hall, May 9, 1945** (excerpts; a short published account also carried in the *Oakland Tribune*, May 9, 1945 "Kaiser to launch huge home building program")

We have called this Press Conference today to announce the organization of a national home and community building enterprise. In this enterprise the Kaiser organization has formed a partnership with Fritz B. Burns and Associates, builders of homes in Los Angeles. The name of this new enterprise is the Kaiser Community Homes Corporation.

Kaiser Community Homes will build homes, grouped together in complete communities ? including health, recreation, school, and commercial centers ? for the families of America everywhere in America. Into the field of homebuilding, it will introduce industrial methods, comparable to those developed in other lines of production. Resultant savings will be reinvested in the homes to enhance its value and service to its owners. On this sound economic basis, Kaiser Community Homes Corporation expects to create a new home market among the majority of U.S. families who do not now own their own homes.

This national home-building enterprise will get under way at once. It will be spearheaded by the immediate construction of 10,000 homes grouped in several communities at West Coast centers of population. Sites for these initial operations already have been purchased by Kaiser Community Homes Corp. In order to command the efficiencies implicit in large-scale operations, the organization will build communities of 200 homes upward, with the average projected at 500 homes.

We have had to think about a lot of things during the last five years, but postwar employment has been for me the lode-star which drew us all toward this day when we could turn our thoughts from war to peace. In announcing Kaiser Community Homes today we are ready to make our first contribution toward that goal.

Also see: *Magnetic Los Angeles: Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* by Greg Hise, 1999.

Short link to this article: <http://k-p.li/1nogqSO>