

# TRADE IN YOUR HOUSE

## Next Year's Model Now Ready

LONDON, May 3

Half a million houses, prefabricated of pressed steel, aluminium asbestos and plywood, for demobilised servicemen and bombed-out families . . . are to be built in Britain . . . to last about 10 years.—*Cable.*

CHRISTCHURCH, May 3

The grave housing situation might be overcome, said a speaker, if houses were built with a life of only 10 years.

"We do not like cheap things, but that seems to me the only thing to do in the present circumstances," remarked the Mayor.—*Press Association message.*

THE same idea expressed simultaneously at both ends of the world—only an urgent need could cause this. And it is an urgent need that has caused this agreement, although we in New Zealand say: "If we *must* build temporary structures," we say in effect, "then we *will*. But it's a pity." However, voices are being raised in America that not merely welcome the suggestion but energetically proclaim it as a gospel of economic and social salvation. "Houses like automobiles!" could be their slogan. "Turn 'em out, on the Assembly Line. Turn 'em in every 20 years for a New Model." In fact these folk insist that Purchase Agreements shall stipulate destruction after 20 years.

The idea is as revolutionary as flight or Lend-Lease. For not merely do we here hold by the British belief that no article is a good job unless it lasts indefinitely: we cling to an Englishman's home as his castle, a heritage to be built up and handed on, an extension of his personality indeed, not a mere "consumption article" to last no longer than a suit or a dinner set.

Well, we *hold* such ideas, these American innovators would say, but we do not practise them. Conditions won't let us: Modern buildings deteriorate and date faster than we admit. Our place of abode must be changed oftener than we allow. Resale as much fills our eye as home-making (let alone dynasty-founding) when we examine our property. In brief—they say—limited-life housing for peripatetic populations is coming on the wave of the future. Better accept the inevitable consciously and so turn it into a blessing and not a curse.

### Argument Outlined

Here is their case: First, to overtake the need we must build quickly: and building quickly means building more flimsily. We know how housing lags behind population in New Zealand. In the U.S.A. more dwellings than we have people in New Zealand will need to be built *each year* for the next eight years to catch up on natural increase. To construct them will take more personnel and equipment than the present building trades possess, and full use of every technique of mass-production and assemblage. And then, when at last houses and tenants run neck and neck, the differences between new style and old style will be so marked that those comparatively well housed to-day will in turn be crying for deliverance. Nearly

half America's houses in 1940 either had no bathroom or needed major repairs, or both. Besides (Argument No. 2) dwellings are in transition—not merely in materials and manufacture, but in our very conception of what constitutes a home. Inhabitants of roomy old "barns" envy flat "rabbits" their cooking and cleaning conveniences. Bungalow suburbanites discontentedly compare their own postage-stamp of shaved grass squeezed between the neighbours' fences with the ultra-expansiveness of the glass-sided dwellings in the quality magazines. Why build to endure when we don't yet know what we want and are still experimenting with materials? The time to build permanently is when we reach perfection. Meanwhile the quicker our turnover the sooner we shall get there.

### Where is Permanence?

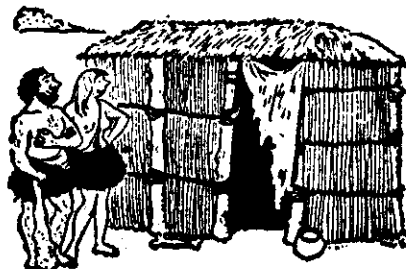
Anyhow permanent building—our evangelist goes on, warming up—presupposes permanent residence. Yet who but farmers to-day have any security of staying where they are? Not merely ancestral estates but even family houses belong to an age that is passing. Possession of a house, particularly if it be a well-built, i.e., an expensive or an old one, has prevented many a man from following his employment out of a derelict area, and barred many an employee from promotion when it involved a shift. Because industries are seeking new markets, new raw materials or new types of power, whole new cities were springing up in various parts of America, Europe, and Asia, even before the great defence-plant migrations began. In U.S.A. another portent was occurring—the Trailer Town. Work would not come to Mahomet, so Mahomet tootled off after work. In short, in the age of technological adjustment about to begin in earnest no one can afford to be tied to a mortgage.



However, all these arguments turn out to be mere preparatory "softening up." The main attack of the Limited-Life advocates turns out, after all their debunking of pride of ownership, to be a frontal appeal to residential patriotism. Why live in a slum? they ask. You will, you know, if you stay long enough where you are. Houses deteriorate, despite paint and face-lifting. Districts that were fresh and even "toney" twenty years ago run second to newer suburbs to-day, and twenty years hence will be areas you avoid when showing visitors round the town. The process is inevitable under our present system of building and is piling up a problem that finally only earthquakes or fires will be able to solve for authorities. The present practice is too much like the fire-agriculture of the ancient Maya which so blighted each area it farmed that the nation had to keep moving towards new territory. A clean break is needed into the ever-regenerating community, the city that never grows old.

Such is the argument. *In toto* it does not apply to New Zealand. But there is enough in it to set us thinking. However—can it be done?

Technically there seems to be no objection. The building industry in the United States is at present far behind its possibilities, mainly through the various crafts within it "having gone round for a decade slamming doors in each other's faces until now they are all imprisoned in obsolete techniques and



inefficient procedures." But the British houses described in the cable were designed after a 2,300-mile tour of this "inefficient" country by the British Building Commission. By the time U.S. gets going it will build faster than Britain with still newer materials by still better methods. When all "house-in-a-day" stunt figures have been discounted as they deserve, cottages like cars and flats like Liberty ships are really possible in America.

But increasing speed does not cut costs so enormously as the layman imagines. Ask any builder. Therefore would not such wholesale replacement be extravagance? It seems so, the evangelists retort, only because we do not realise how expensive present house finance is. For, when you have paid rent (in the form of interest and repairs) for a whole working lifetime, plus repayment of the original thousand-or-so loan, you do not own a thousand-pound house! By its own depreciation, by the depreciation of its neighbourhood, by the relatively greater appeal of newer, more convenient houses, its worth in real money is under half what you have paid.



So far the growth in population, a steady trend towards more money for less goods, and the present shelter-famine keeps this from being apparent. But it is real, they insist, and presently we shall feel it. The new scheme, on the other hand, places a Replacement Fund on every house built, so that, when destruction-day arrives, you will not only have completely

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