

4 THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF HIGH TECH HOUSING

The nation's most promising effort in high tech housing – as well as its most abject failure, was the Lustron House. Designed in 1946 by architects Morris Beckman and Roy Blass – and financed with a \$15.5 million dollar loan from the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation – the Lustron House was conceived by engineer Carl Strandlund as a low-cost, “high tech” response to the housing needs of returning GI's. Components of the all-steel, porcelain enamel paneled ranch style house would be delivered by truck.

Unfortunately, the Lustron Corporation encountered significant early production problems, and after only about 2,500 units were delivered, declared bankruptcy. It left the federal government with the largest loss ever taken on a housing program. Interestingly, the remaining Lustrons are today prized by their owners for their thoughtful design and easy maintenance.

Tiled Time Capsules

American housing remains a modified custom-design on-site construction system constrained by 1920s era definitions of housing, antiquated building and zoning codes, and a tax system that encourages communities to exclude less expensive housing. What is still needed is a factory-molded basic unit along the lines of what Lustron sought to achieve in the 1940s, with plug-on elements permitting expansion or retraction as family needs change, designed to be organized into attractive higher density neighborhoods capable of service by public transit. Such a system could well replace the poorly constructed low-density deteriorating neighborhoods that ring our central cities and bring home ownership to a larger segment of Americans.

Tiled Time Capsules

by Beth W. Orenstein

Thomas Kotch and Wendy Glottke were graduate students in Binghamton, N.Y., when they first saw houses from the late 1940s and early '50s made entirely of porcelain and steel. “There were two side-by-side, one salmon-colored and one blue,” recalled Kotch, now a chemistry professor at Muhlenberg College. Every



Porcelain enamel finished panels covered the Lustron's exterior. This Lustron found a home in Closter, New Jersey.

time they passed the metal homes, which looked as though they were made of giant tiles, “we would laugh and wonder, ‘Who would live in a house like that?’”

At the end of this month, they will be the answer to their own question.

Kotch and Glottke, director of the newly formed forensic science program at Cedar Crest College, are buying a dove-gray tile house at the corner of 22nd and Washington streets in West Allentown.

About 2,500 such dwellings were built in 35 states east of the Rockies between 1948 and 1951. Made by the Lustron Corp., the residences were supposed to be the answer to the nation's need for inexpensive, quick-to-build housing as tens of thousands of GI's returned home from World War II.

Daniel Joseph, the Allentown Realtor who sold Kotch and Glottke their home, calls the Lustron “the Edsel of the housing industry,” after the Ford Motor Company's marketing flop of the late '50s.

“I have to confess, but Wendy had no intention of buying the home when she called and asked about it,” said Kotch. “She just wanted to see the inside.” Once inside, however, she fell in love. And so

the couple, who believe in resource management and recycling, began to investigate. The Lustron, Glottke said, “is in keeping with longevity and minimal impact” on the environment that's important to her.

They learned that there's no official registry of Lustrons, but about 1,000 of the 2,498 that were built remain. The houses didn't fall down, Kotch said. In fact, they're quite durable – fireproof and termite-proof.

The houses came in several pastel colors – pink, tan, yellow, aqua, blue, green and gray. ... A two-bedroom Lustron with 1,025 square feet of space cost about \$7,000 in 1948, making it competitive with similarly sized wood-framed houses. However, cost overruns forced Strandlund to raise the price to \$11,000 soon after they started coming off the assembly lines.

The houses, which have no duct work, also have a unique radiant panel heating system. Warm air, formed in a heating unit in the utility room, is circulated through a chamber that extends over the entire ceiling.

Joseph said the five-room residence appears small from the outside, “but its layout is quite nice.” The master bedroom is large – 12 by 12 feet – while the 10- by-14 foot second bedroom offers about the same floor space.

Kotch said he's always been impressed by the Lustron design. “There's no wasted space in a Lustron home. Just about everywhere you look is closet space.” ... The house came with built-in picture hooks because the only other way to hang anything on the walls is with magnets. The dwelling also has a lot of other built-in features, including a vanity in the master bedroom, shelf and serving space in the dining room, and bookshelves in the living room. All inside doors are “pocket doors,” which slide into and out of the wall.

Once they're settled, Kotch and Glottke plan to invite neighbors and friends to an open house and show off what they've done with their Lustron home. “We want to be known,” Kotch said, “as the people who put the lust back in the Lustron.”

Excerpted with permission of the author from an article that originally appeared in the June 13, 1999 issue of The Morning Call newspaper.