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Tempo DuPage

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1996

SEEKING SHELTER
Students study the greatest
fears of the Cold War era.
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Lustron homes, such as this one in Lombard, can be recognized by their 2-by-2-foot enamel-over-steel panels on the outside of the house. Tribune photos by John Dzekan



'There isn't a week that goes by that I don't get a call from a Lustron owner.'

Tom Fetters of Lombard,
Lustron book author

This house is a steel!

Though Lustron homes never really caught on, these all-metal models have their admirers

By S.R. Carroll
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Imagine being able to wash and wax your house, just like your car. Steve Maglio of Lombard can do that. Maglio lives in a Lustron home, one of 61 post-World War II enamel-over-steel prefabricated homes erected in DuPage and Kane Counties and among 307 built in Illinois.

One of the reasons Maglio chose his home, he said, was because of its low maintenance. "My wife and I fell in love with it because it fit our lifestyle," he said.

Back in the late 1940s, the appeal of a home that would require little upkeep had its attraction too. It was a time when men were returning from the war and housing was scarce, and Lustron homes also had the advantage that they could be assembled quickly. Plus, they needed few furnishings because the design included a generous amount of built-in cabinets and closets for storage.

"They are loaded with closets," said Wanda

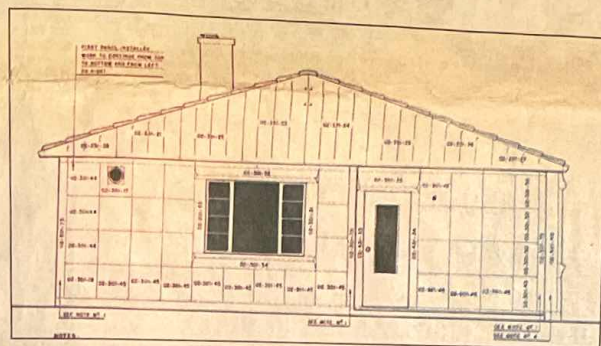


Kohan of Lombard, who moved into her house six years ago and loves it.

Lustron homes can be recognized by their 2-by-2-foot enamel-over-steel panels on the outside of the house, similar to the materials used today to build White Castle hamburger restaurants and Fannie May candy shops.

In fact, Tom Fetters of Lombard, who has written a book about Lustron homes, got interested in them years ago when he was trying to keep his young daughter Jean (who is now 26) from fussing during rides in the car.

He would tell her to look for the Lustron homes, and when she found one, she would shout, "Daddy,



A man named Carl Strandlund from Minnesota launched the line of homes in the late 1940s.

Daddy, tile house," while pointing frantically.

When Jean was in high school, she decided to do a project on Lustron homes for a history class, and she had to interview a homeowner. She took her dad along because he had never been inside one.

"When Jean finished her paper, she was done with Lustron homes, but I was hooked," he said. Fetters has gone on to document 1,800 of the

homes across the country, taking photos of them, interviewing owners and unintentionally becoming an information resource for Lustron owners.

"There isn't a week that goes by that I don't get a call from a Lustron owner," he said.

A man named Carl Strandlund from Minnesota launched the line of homes in the late 1940s when

SEE LUSTRON, PAGE 6



Wanda Kohan of Lombard in a bedroom of her Lustron home: "They are loaded with closets," she says of the unique metal structures, and they also have built-in cabinets, saving on furniture expenses.

Lustron

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

He approached the government to buy steel, which was in short supply, to build gas stations for Chicago Vitreous Co.

"The only way to get steel was to make houses," said Fetters, "because there was a need at that time with all the soldiers coming home."

Strandlund had architects draw up plans and erected a model home in Hinsdale on south Madison Street in the middle of a nursery with beautiful flower beds.

"They brought in the secretary of housing from Washington. He liked it and asked Strandlund how soon he could be up and running," said Fetters.

Strandlund got a \$37.5 million government loan, set up Lustron Corp. (named for "luster on steel") as a separate company and began production in an old airplane factory in Columbus, Ohio.

He put up model homes in just about every big town in the Midwest. Although the houses weren't inexpensive at that time, averaging about \$9,000 to \$10,000, orders poured in. Production never kept up with demand.

"There was a construction company called American Community Builders in Park Forest that sold

2,000 homes, but none were ever erected, because Lustron couldn't fulfill the orders," said Fetters.

The homes stand alone in neighborhoods now as odd birds among conventional housing, testimonies to a bold attempt that failed.

There are several theories on why Lustron didn't succeed. Jim Morrow, director of the All-Steel Historic Home in Chesterton, Ind., a Lustron home that's on the National Register of Historic Places and open to the public for tours from May through October, thinks Strandlund was a few years ahead of his time.

"I think if Strandlund would have been given another five years, Lustron would have had a big impact and might have accelerated the use of steel in residential construction," he said. "It has only been in the last two or three years that there has been an increased use of steel framing and steel roofing in residential building."

Technically, said Morrow, Lustron was dissolved because Strandlund couldn't meet the loan payment schedule the government set up for him. But Morrow believes that rich congressmen were battling behind the scenes for control of the company and had hopes to revive it.

"Testimony in the Congressio-

Where to find a museum piece

The All-Steel Historic Home, maintained by the Heritage Society of Northwest Indiana Inc., 411 Bowser Ave., Chesterton, Ind., is open for tours Tuesday-Sunday 1-5 p.m. from May 1-Oct.31. For information, call 219-926-3669, or write P.O. Box 508, Chesterton, Ind., 46304-0508. Admission is free, although donations are welcomed.

Steve Maglio's and Wanda Kohan's Lustron homes are located across the street from each other at 226 and 243 N. Garfield St., respectively, in Lombard. They are not open for viewing, however.

S.R. Carroll

nal Report accuses certain members of wanting a piece of the action," he said.

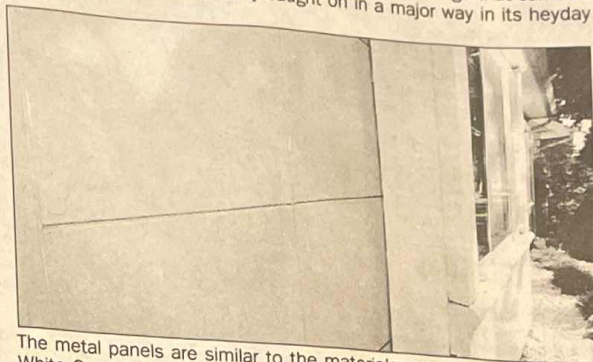
At any rate, the company folded, and Lustron homes today remain as unique reminders of the past.

Morrow lived for a while in the Chesterton house before opening it for tours.



The exterior of Kohan's house, one of the few dwellings that can be washed and waxed like a car. But this type of house never really caught on in a major way in its heyday after World War II.

Tribune photos by John Dzekan



The metal panels are similar to the materials used today to build White Castle hamburger restaurants.

"It was very pleasant to live there," he said. "You never have to repaint the exterior, never, never have to decorate inside and never have to replace the roof [which is also made of steel]. Underscore that word never."

The sleek insides were said to be designed by automobile stylists. The kitchen cabinets were made of steel, and between the kitchen and dining area was a wall unit with a pass-through for serving. All the Lustrons had a combination Thor dishwasher and clotheswasher.

In the master bedroom, a wall of closets surrounded a mirrored vanity.

The outside of the homes came in four colors: yellow, gray, blue-green and tan. Most of the interiors were done in a battleship gray, with accents of tan or yellow. Pocket doors that slide inside walls were used throughout.

Heat was supplied by a fan in a utility room that forced warm air between the insulated roof and metal ceiling, creating comfortable draft-free radiant heat.

"People loved these homes," said Gloria Fetters, Tom's wife,

who has helped him collect data for his book (he has written three others on railroad history), which is being considered by a publisher.

The only drawback, said Maglio's wife, Ellen, is that nails cannot be used to hang pictures.

"You have to invest in magnets, and I mean monster magnets at a special magnet store. Your typical refrigerator magnet holds nothing," said Maglio, who has spent about \$150 on magnets to hang everything in her house.

On the other hand, she loves all the built-ins.

"I don't need any dressers," she said, standing in her bedroom, extending her arm to indicate all the built-in storage. "It's so cool."

Most of the Lustron homes in the Chicago area are found in the suburbs because Chicago building codes during the time that Lustron was in business required plaster walls and ceilings. A Lustron model home was exhibited for a while on Lake Shore Drive, said Fetters, but then was moved to McHenry.

Lustron homes also stayed primarily in the Midwest, because

the price of shipping over the Rocky Mountains was prohibitive, said Fetters.

In addition, there were also union flaps in some cities about prefabricated houses being erected. "In one place, the windows were broken out so that the local glaziers could reinstall them," said Fetters.

But the advantages outweighed the disadvantages for many people.

Fetters described how a typical house was erected, flipping through a three-ring blue notebook he keeps filled with newspaper clippings and his research on the Lustron homes, then pointing to black and white photos of a Lustron house being built.

"The frame was set on a channel in cement, then the trusses were put up. It could be framed out in three hours, and a whole house could be installed, plumbing and everything, in two days," he said.

Each home was numbered and tagged with a plate. It pleases Fetters each time he finds a home with its plate intact in the laundry room.

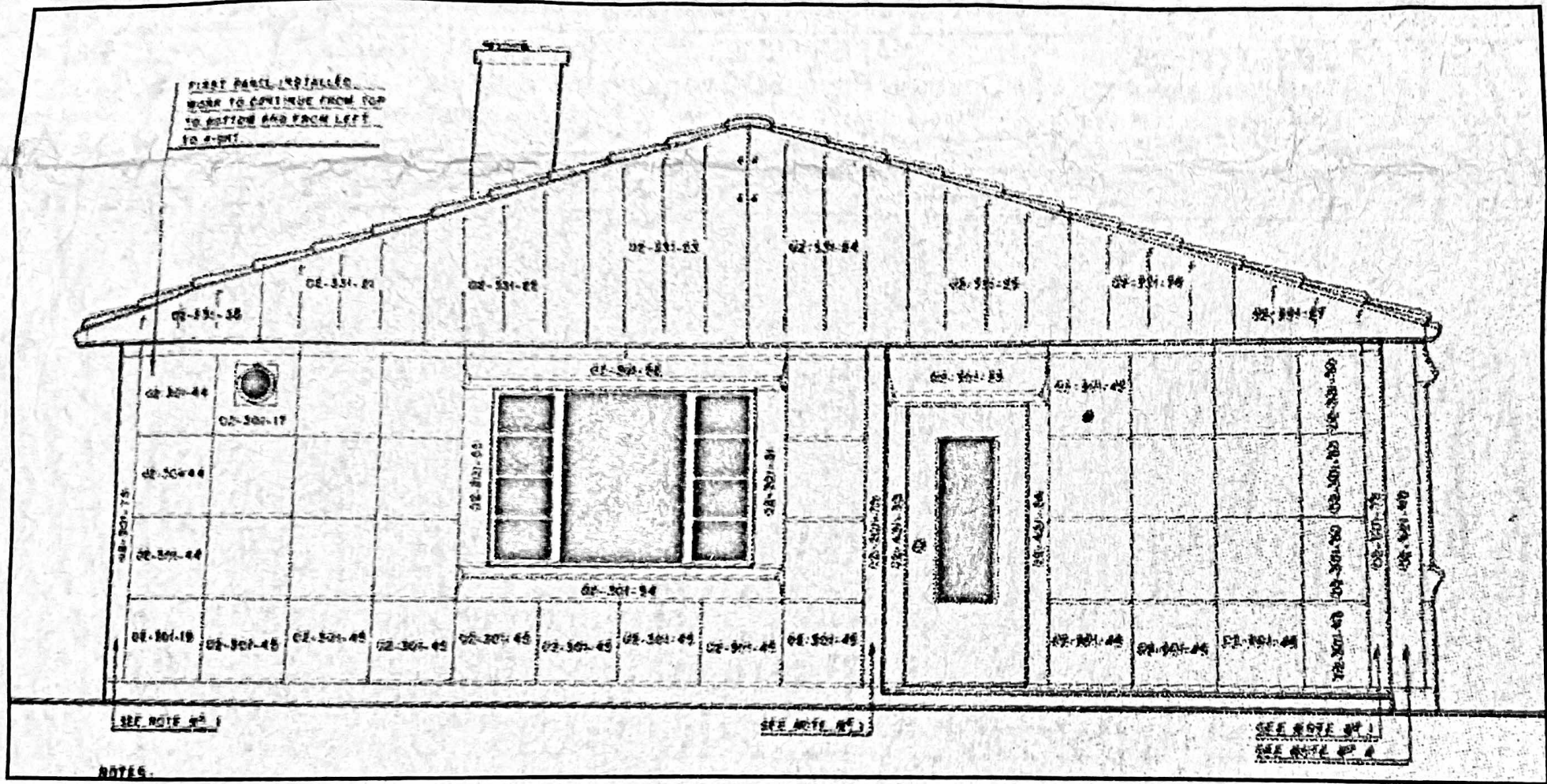
"Using the serial numbers, I have been able to figure out that the company would make 60 to 75 houses of one color, then switch to another color."

The early advertisements for the home crowed that Lustrons were fireproof, impervious to rust, decay and damage from rats, termites and other vermin, and the entire home would maintain a like-new appearance for years to come.

Morrow says the claims were not exaggerated.

"These houses are 45 or so years old," he said. "They have a very hard, durable finish, and there's no reason why these houses shouldn't be here indefinitely."

Now the most comfortable sofa maker will even pad your wallet!



A man named Carl Strandlund from Minnesota launched the line of homes in the late 1940s.

