

A Door Closes on the Past

By Susan Straight
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It's almost the end for the 60 Lustron houses in the Geiger Ridge and Argonne Hills sections of Marine Corps Base Quantico.

The tiny houses, a post-World War II effort to provide affordable homes, were prefabricated of porcelain-enamel coated steel from 1948 through 1950 by Lustron Corp. of Ohio. The company built about 2,500 of the houses, which are scattered around the country. The houses were never a commercial success, but a cult grew up around them.

Those fans do not necessarily include the military families who have been assigned to live in the Lustron houses. It is "like living in a filing cabinet," said Fred Sullivan, director of family housing at the base.

At 956 square feet in a two-bedroom and 990 square feet in a three-bedroom, both with one bathroom, the houses are tiny by today's standards. A recent change in military housing rules will allow families more spacious quarters, and the Lustrons will be removed within three years.

Life in the Lustrons has not been all bad. Marine Jimmy Ensley and his wife, Cynthia, have few complaints about theirs. "This is our fifth house in four years," said Jimmy, and "our first single home."

"The size is nice," said Cynthia Ensley, compared with other base housing they have lived in. She also likes the way the house stays cool in the summer.

The winter is a different story, said her husband, who has felt a draft through the walls on cold, gusty nights.

But the Ensleys are glad to have their place while it lasts. They have been told that their house is slated for demolition, but they do not expect it to happen until after they leave Quantico.

Carmen Otero, another Lustron resident in Geiger Ridge, said that if she had the choice of living in a Lustron or more traditional base housing, she would "definitely choose this one again."

Besides the unusual look of their pink house, which her husband likens to bathroom tiles, she enjoys the kitchen, the yard and their neighborhood. "I like living here," she said.

The base has not set a date to destroy the houses, which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. First, Quantico must go through a required consultation process with the state historical preservation office and the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in an effort to keep to a minimum the harm caused by removing the largest single development of Lustron houses.

Sullivan said the Marine Corps is willing to work to ensure that the blue, pink and mint-green houses that dot the hills above Quantico's golf course and stadium are not lost entirely. For example, the Marines would consider selling them to individuals for placement elsewhere. Sullivan said he has not been approached by any would-be buyers.

That would be a workable option, said Susan Smead, architectural historian at Virginia's Historic Resources Department, who is responsible for working with the base as it gets rid of the houses.

Similar deals have been set up in Virginia, she said. The Short Pump Grocery and Shell Station near Richmond survived demolition in 1996 when the Rockville Centreville Steam and Gas Association bought it for its "Field Days of the Past" tourist complex. The association moved the building, built in the late 1930s and eligible for the National Register, four miles west to Goochland County.

Would anyone buy a 960-square-foot steel house with nonstandard, discontinued components? Some people are interested.

A woman in New Jersey recently wanted to buy one for her severely allergic mother, said Nathalie Wright, the national survey coordinator in the Ohio Historic Preservation Office. The woman thought the enameled steel would harbor fewer allergens than conventional building materials, Wright said.

There may be other potential buyers, if Web sites and Internet message boards are any indication. There is also a Lustron Home Preservation Society and a recent book about the old houses.

Thomas Fetters, author of the book "Lustron Homes: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment," said there are two categories of potential Lustron home buyers: retro lovers and the allergic.

Fetters, a packaging materials expert, became interested in Lustrons when his daughter undertook a high school research project on the little tiled houses in their community of Lombard, Ill. If Marine Corps Base Quantico removes all its Lustrons, the Lombard cluster would become the largest.

Even if the base demolishes or sells most of the houses, another option is to preserve one or more of them in a different location as a tourist attraction, said Alan Barszewski, Quantico's family housing construction program manager.

There is no museum for Lustrons, said Wright, who receives a "fair amount of calls for something so obscure." Beyond the normal research inquiries, she gets questions about topics such as how to assess and repair fire damage to the all-steel structures.

That type of question, standard knowledge on mainstream houses for most insurance companies and home contractors, is an example of one of the Lustron Corp.'s biggest challenges. The houses "were too unconventional," Wright said.

Owners had difficulty obtaining building permits and finding builders willing to try to assemble the unfamiliar houses. City governments, concerned about property values and tax revenue, were loath to allow the experimental structures in their lucrative town centers, Wright said. "Lustron fought an uphill battle the whole time," she said.

Despite such obstacles, about 2,560 Lustrons were built in the United States from 1948 to 1950, Fetters said. (The number is slightly higher than most published estimates, because the Lustron Corp. itself published a final count in February 1950 and never updated that figure with those shipped in the few months before production actually ended, Fetters said. His research led him to conclude that 62 more of the houses were built during the company's last four months.)

Fetters noted that Lustron houses are more threatened in urban than rural areas because of their large lots and relatively small size.

The homes were designed to satisfy the postwar housing shortage of the late 1940s, said John Burns of the National Park Service. A few of the Lustron communities have been documented by the National Park Service.

Lustron houses are an example of the transition from wartime economy to peacetime economy, Burns said. The Lustron Corp. took over a Columbus, Ohio, bomber factory that had all the machinery needed to fabricate steel. With modifications, founder Carl G. Strandlund, vice president and general manager of Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Co., and his team of engineers changed the factory's output from planes to houses.

For example, Lustron transformed the stamp used to form steel into the complex shapes required for wings and fuselages into a bathtub press, Burns said. The press turned out 5 foot, 1 1/2-inch bathtubs; they were 1 1/2 inches longer than standard American bathtub but neatly fit the design of the Lustron bathroom.

That was a symptom of the company's problem. The engineers of the steel houses saw themselves as making a prototype with parts that did not have to conform to other American building standards, Burns

said. By creating stand-alone components, the company "had enormous capacity to produce thousands per year but no ability to sell in the larger market," he said.

Another example of an idiosyncratic Lustron component is the round furnace. "Where in the world do you see round furnaces?" Burns said.

Even the federal government's \$37.5 million in loans from 1946 to 1950 were not enough to make Lustron Corp. a going business. In mid-1950, it passed into receivership and was auctioned off.

Ultimately, Burns said, there are plenty of good reasons people do not want to live in Lustron houses. "I can understand the military's position," he said. Besides size, strikes against the novelty houses include the fact that any wiring modifications such as adding cable or a new phone line must be done on the surface.

Also, it is nearly impossible to make additions, which require cutting through the steel and using non-matching materials. "Any additions I've seen on a Lustron make me shudder," Burns said.

But for fans of Lustrons, the appeal continues. "People just love those little houses," Sullivan said.

The all-steel Lustron houses at Quantico, in blue, pink or mint green, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Marine Corps wants to sell Lustron homes to buyers who would move the unusual steel structures off the Quantico base.

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