

Shine On, Lustron

In the years after World War II, the U.S. was desperately short of affordable housing, while industrial capacity was at a historic high. Conditions were ideal for a bold experiment in prefabrication, and Chicago industrialist and inventor Carl Strandlund rose to the occasion. Armed with a \$12.5 million government-backed loan, Strandlund retooled a 23-acre aircraft plant in Columbus, Ohio, and began producing an all-steel home he dubbed the Lustron.

The Lustron's defining feature was a high-temperature porcelain enamel finish that could be wiped clean with a damp cloth on the inside, and hosed down like a car on

the outside. The space-saving design included interior pocket doors, built-in cabinets, and an innovative whole-house radiant heating system that warmed the living space by circulating 140°F air through a shallow plenum above the steel ceiling. Exteriors came in four colors — Surf Blue, Maize Yellow, Desert Tan, or Dove Gray — with white trim and dark gray roofing.

For a mere \$9,000, a local Lustron dealer would arrive at the buyer's lot with the entire house packed on a 45-foot flatbed truck. Assembling the structure on a slab foundation ordinarily took about 350 man-hours, which meant the proud new owners could start moving in within two weeks or so.

Strandlund's original plan was to produce 15,000 homes in 1947, and 30,000 the following year. But while there was no shortage of buyers, his company was quickly undone by a combination of mismanagement and rising steel prices. After less than two years in operation — and with more than 20,000 orders still in hand — the plant closed its doors for good.

The Lustron homes themselves, however, have stood the test of time quite well. The National Trust for Historic Preservation estimates that 1,500 of the 2,680 Lustrons built still stand today. For those wishing to learn more about Lustrons — or just hoping to get a feel for what it might be like to live in what one enthusiast has described as “a very large filing cabinet” — the website lustronpreservation.org (maintained by the National Trust) is an excellent place to start. — *Jon Vara*

Lustron interiors featured a pastel color palette and built-in cabinets (right). The factory-welded double-stud wall framing was reinforced by lightweight diagonal bracing rods (below). Relatively well insulated for their day, the houses had 6 inches of loose mineral wool in the attic plus an inch of sheet material inside the walls. The porcelain-enamel wall panels and roof tiles on this two-bedroom “Westchester” (below right) show little sign of wear after six decades of exposure to the elements.

