

THE BETTER HOMES IN AMERICA MOVEMENT

VERSION 1.0 · 2026-06-11 · ALEX PEMBERTON
 COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", NASHVILLE SCENE

FINDING

Better Homes in America presented itself as a civic-improvement campaign but built racial exclusion into its structure: segregated demonstration clubs, a model home priced beyond middle-class reach, and buyer guidance that taught white purchasers to weigh their neighbors by race.

SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *BHA promoted a fiction that these were actually middle-class homes*
- *white and Black demonstration clubs*
- *the general type of people living in the neighborhood*

ABSTRACT

Better Homes in America presented itself as a civic campaign teaching Americans to own better houses; from the outset it tethered child-rearing to white, middle-class, single-family ownership and built racial exclusion into its structure. White demonstration clubs received donated lots, blueprints, and materials to build complete model homes; the movement steered Black clubs to renovation projects. The model homes were sold as the attainable reward of hard work and priced beyond what most workers could pay. The movement's buyer guidance taught white purchasers to weigh the racial character of a neighborhood as a property quality. It treated the suburban single-family house as the only respectable place to raise a child. For the campaign's path into Hoover's zoning program and *Euclid v. Ambler*, see [From Model Homes to Federal Law: BHA, Hoover, the Zoning Acts, and Euclid](#).

SOURCES

Scholarship

- Karen Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal](#) (University of North Carolina Press, 2025). The current scholarly anchor on BHA. Chapter 9, "The Best Possible Environment for the Growing Child," treats the movement directly; the racial structure of its demonstration program (pp. 5, 217–219, 234, 241–242) is read as constitutive.
- Jennifer Lynn Pettit, *A Better Home for Every Body: Homemaking and Liberal Individualism in 1920s America* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2016). Reads the movement through liberal political theory; chapter 5 works through the *Better Homes* guidebooks to document the racial

structure, including the 1926 guidebook's framing of Black and immigrant neighborhoods as objects of white tutelage.

- Janet Hutchison, "The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture II*, ed. Camille Wells (1986): 168–78; "Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal," *Journal of Policy History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 184–210; and "Better Homes and Gullah," *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (1993): 102–18, on the racial structure of the demonstration program.
- LeeAnn Lands, "Be a Patriot, Buy a Home: Re-Imagining Home Owners and Home Ownership in Early 20th Century Atlanta," *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 (2008): 943–65. On the "Own Your Own Home" campaigns that preceded and fed BHA.
- Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (Liveright, 2017), ch. 4, "'Own Your Own Home.'" For the *Better Homes Manual's* buyer guidance and the federal-policy bridge.
- Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (University of Chicago Press, 1980) and *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Pantheon, 1981); Helen Corbin Monchow, *The Use of Deed Restrictions in Subdivision Development* (Institute for Research in Land Economics, 1928). The period architectural and covenant context, and the model home as an instrument of moral and social order.

Interviews

- Dr. Karen Benjamin, Elmhurst University, interview by Alex Pemberton, May 18, 2026. Quoted verbatim.

Primary documents

- *Better Homes Manual*, ed. Blanche Halbert (University of Chicago Press, 1931). The movement's compendium of building, maintenance, and purchase guidance. The "general type of people living in the neighborhood" phrasing appears verbatim on p. 89, in "Property Considerations in Selecting the Home Site" by John M. Gries (Executive Secretary, President's Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership) and James S. Taylor (Chief, Division of Building and Housing, U.S. Dept. of Commerce), reprinted from *How To Own Your Home* (Better Homes in America, 1929), pp. 14–18. Primary scan: Internet Archive, betterhomesmanua00halbrich.
- Better Homes in America, *Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns* (1925, 1926). The annual organizing manuals; the 1926 edition celebrated the prior year's Atlanta demonstrations.
- Davidson County Register of Deeds, Book 770, pp. 41–42 and 568 (1927), the recorded Green Hills covenants; the Tennessean Model Home, 1612 North Observatory Drive (completed April 1927).

A PUBLIC-PRIVATE CAMPAIGN WITH FEDERAL BACKING

Marie Meloney, editor of *The Delineator*, launched Better Homes in America in 1922 with a \$300,000 Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial grant. It built on the for-profit “Own-Your-Own-Home” campaigns, which had recast debt-financed single-family ownership as a patriotic duty and a mark of citizenship.⁵ Herbert Hoover, as Commerce Secretary, served as its board president; James Ford, a Harvard sociologist, ran it day to day; Calvin Coolidge and most of his cabinet lent their names.⁴ The annual demonstration-home competition ran from 1923 into the 1930s and reached thousands of communities through local committees staffed by the women’s clubs and the real-estate industry, carrying federal prestige and Rockefeller money with it. This was Hoover’s “voluntary associationalism” in place of direct state action.

CHILD-REARING TETHERED TO THE SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE

Dr. Karen Benjamin, the author of *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal*, argues that BHA “tethered intensive parenting to suburban housing as the best means to support white, middle-class efforts to raise healthy and virtuous citizens,” and that the movement “narrowly defined” the American child as “white and middle class.”¹ In an interview, Benjamin said: “when they use the word family, they’re actually talking about the presence of children... they’re not even code words — it’s not like euphemisms — those were just the assumptions of that society. They didn’t need to explain it, because people knew what it meant.”³ The single-family house was the only respectable setting for that child: “A single family house is really the only respectable way to raise a child...” surrounded “by a lawn and surrounded by other people who own a single-family house as well.”³ Hoover backed the movement as Commerce Secretary and as president. Housing and children, Benjamin said, were “his two most important issues, and I would say those aren’t two different issues in his mind — that was one issue. You needed better housing because that was important for raising better children, in a period when you have active eugenics movements.”³ James Ford, the movement’s executive director, stated the purpose in the same terms: the home was “the environment in which the life and development of the child are primarily determined,” and “through the conscious selection of environing factors in homes which are the chief environment of children it becomes possible in the long run to redirect the trends of civilization.”¹³

WHITE CLUBS BUILT HOUSES; BLACK CLUBS WERE ASSIGNED RENOVATIONS

White committees received donated lots, blueprints, materials, and furnishings to build complete model homes; Black committees were assigned “renovation” projects — cleaning yards, painting, planting. The national organization “sanctioned gross inequality” and gave awards to Black committees for renovation while white committees built complete houses.⁶ Its organizing manuals framed the reach into Black and immigrant neighborhoods as tutelage: the 1926 *Guidebook for*

Better Homes Campaigns described that population as “a large population of immigrants or of negroes, who because of limited education have not yet learned the ways of securing the best living conditions which are within their reach.”¹⁴ The 1925 Atlanta exhibit listed among its demonstrations “a home for white people” and “a home for negroes,” with racially segregated “school practice apartments.”⁷ In an interview, Benjamin said that in many places, particularly rural ones, the Better Homes “demonstration” for Black clubs was “just putting curtains on what anyone would call... a shack that wasn’t well constructed, or planting a few flowers” and “nowhere close to a demonstration home that was actually built for that purpose.”³ Atlanta, where the Neighborhood Union and Black universities mustered real resources, was “an exception.” Among the Gullah, the movement’s white, middle-class domestic ideal recast existing Black and rural housing as deficient.² A 1924 Better Homes Week promotion in *The Nashville Tennessean* sorted the demonstrations by race: “All kinds and types of homes will be shown in these demonstrations. There will be little negro cabins, modest bungalows, and more pretentious abodes.” No Black BHA demonstration club in Nashville has surfaced in the archives searched.

A “MIDDLE-CLASS” HOUSE PRICED BEYOND THE MIDDLE CLASS

Benjamin says the BHA sold “this fiction that this is actually for a middle-class home.” The demonstration houses were “always sold as... ‘every man’s home’ — this is something that anyone who works hard can attain. And that wasn’t true. The demonstration homes often sold for, at the time, \$10,000 or more... you’re already hitting this kind of upper-middle-class level or above.”³ She compared the effect to “the middle-class home on a TV show — something that is not affordable to your average, even upper-middle-class family.” Nashville bears this out. The Tennessean Model Home at 1612 North Observatory Drive sold to Holt and Salome Bean for \$12,250 in 1927 — above the average home value in every one of Nashville’s 40 census tracts — and sat among lots carrying minimum building restrictions of \$5,000 to \$7,500.⁸

THE FLOOR PLAN WAS BUILT AROUND THE CHILD

Benjamin describes a layout organized around “a mom and children — and mom usually having a baby.” The dining room shrank and “the parlor” was eliminated, replaced by “a family room or a playroom, or a rec room.” The parlor was “a really stupid thing to have in a house for a family because the children aren’t allowed to go into the parlor.” The playroom’s toys taught gendered adult roles: for girls, miniature “ironing boards and vacuum cleaners,” so that “instead of helping mother [she] learns her gendered tasks through play”; for boys, “construction sets.” Efficiency for the housewife was the watchword — “we want to save mom steps” — so the houses “are actually getting smaller” even as modern conveniences made them more expensive.³ The house was, in the words of Caroline Bartlett Crane’s 1924 “Everyman’s House,” “a plant for the manufacture of good citizens.”⁷ Reformers had used domestic design since the late nineteenth century to impose

a moral order on a diverse working-class and immigrant population.⁹ Better Homes turned the same attention on the white middle class.

BUYER GUIDANCE: SELECT YOUR NEIGHBORS

The 1931 *Better Homes Manual* added neighborhood advice to its construction and maintenance guidance, directing buyers to weigh “the general type of people living in the neighborhood.” Under the heading “Character of the neighborhood,” the text reads: “While a family may think that it would like to live close to relatives and friends, this factor should not be given too much weight. Nevertheless, the general type of people living in the neighborhood is important, especially if there are children in the family, who should be brought up in the right kind of surroundings.”¹⁰ The guidance, Richard Rothstein argues, “reinforced segregationist attitudes and housing policies, encouraging white flight as a positive social and financial choice.”¹¹ BHA taught white buyers to read a neighborhood’s people as a quality of the property. The appraisal profession adopted the same concept, and after 1934 the FHA wrote it into underwriting (see [The Racial Theory of Value: A False Idea That Made the Market](#)).

“PROTECTIVE RATHER THAN RESTRICTIVE”: THE STRATEGY THAT OUTLIVED THE COVENANTS

Before the New Deal’s housing-stabilization policies, homeownership was precarious; owners wanted freedom to adapt their property to changing economic conditions. Benjamin documents period developers assuring buyers that deed restrictions were “protective rather than restrictive.” Advertising for Green Hills promoted “RESTRICTIONS — For Your Protection.”¹² In an interview she explained that restrictions “are protecting the developer, far more than the buyer,” so developers repackaged them as protections “for your family... for your children.”

When zoning followed, “you see the same language: that the zoning is protection.”³ The 2025 MHZC narrative for Green Hills East repeats the rhetoric: it presents BHA, the model home, and the \$5,000 minimum as civic improvement and omits the racial covenant recorded in the same deeds.⁸ Benjamin said the narrative “completely dance[s] around... the motivation for [suburban subdivisions’] existence in the first place,” reminding her “of a plantation tour... ‘here’s the architecture and it was built this year, and here’s the china’ — and doesn’t mention slavery at all.”³

NOTES

1. Karen Benjamin, [Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools: Selling Segregation Before the New Deal](#) (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025), 207 (“tethered intensive parenting to suburban housing as the best means to support white, middle-class efforts to raise healthy and virtuous citizens”) and 5 (the movement’s narrow definition of the American child as “white and middle class”). ↩
2. Janet Hutchison, “The Cure for Domestic Neglect: Better Homes in America, 1922–1935,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 2 (1986): 168–78; “Building for Babbitt: The State and the Suburban Home Ideal,” *Journal of Policy History* 9, no. 2 (1997): 184–210; and “Better Homes and Gullah,” *Agricultural History* 67, no. 2 (1993): 102–18. ↩
3. Karen Benjamin, interview by the author, May 18, 2026. ↩↩↩↩↩↩↩

4. Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools*, 217–18 (Hoover as board president; James Ford as executive director; Coolidge and most of his cabinet on the board). ↩
5. LeeAnn Lands, "Be a Patriot, Buy a Home: Re-Imagining Home Owners and Home Ownership in Early 20th Century Atlanta," *Journal of Social History* 41, no. 4 (2008): 943–65. ↩
6. Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools*, 218–19 (the national organization "sanctioned gross inequality" by awarding Black committees for renovation while white committees built complete houses). ↩
7. Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools*, 219 (the 1925 Atlanta exhibit's racial labels, quoting the *Atlanta Constitution*; and Caroline Bartlett Crane's 1924 "Everyman's House" as "a plant for the manufacture of good citizens"). ↩ ↩
8. Davidson County Register of Deeds, Book 770, pp. 41–42 and 568 (1927), the recorded Green Hills covenants and the \$5,000 minimum building restriction; and the 2025 Metro overlay narrative for Green Hills East. On the \$12,250 sale of the model home to Holt and Salome Bean, see Holt Bean: A Life. ↩ ↩
9. Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). ↩
10. *Better Homes Manual*, ed. Blanche Halbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), 89, in "Property Considerations in Selecting the Home Site" by John M. Gries and James S. Taylor; reprinted from *How To Own Your Home* (Better Homes in America, 1929). Primary scan: Internet Archive, betterhomesmanua00halbrich. ↩
11. Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017), ch. 4, "Own Your Own Home." ↩
12. Benjamin, *Good Parents, Better Homes, and Great Schools*, 234 (period developers assuring buyers that deed restrictions were "protective rather than restrictive"). ↩
13. James Ford, introduction to *Better Homes Manual*, ed. Blanche Halbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931), ix–x. Ford was the executive director of Better Homes in America. ↩
14. Better Homes in America, *Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns* no. 12 (1926), 11; quoted in Jennifer Lynn Pettit, *A Better Home for Every Body: Homemaking and Liberal Individualism in 1920s America* (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2016), 355. ↩

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