Suburban Steel
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What’s that weird house doing there?” my aunt asked my father as we drove past a Lustron during the summer of 1975. That’s when I first heard the story, and although I’m sure I feigned interest in the back seat of the car as my father told us how these unusual houses came to be, I did remember the story. Although many aunts have no doubt subsequently sniffed at the idea of living in a porcelain-enamed steel prefabricated house, I no longer feign interest in the story. Suburban Steel is a culmination of that childhood memory and an attempt to recount a portion of the history of a company that in the late-1940s claimed it had “the house America was waiting for.”

In Mansfield, Ohio, where I grew up, there was one Lustron on my street and one on the next street over, which was a bit strange for a community comprised mainly of brick colonials and sprawling ranches. My father’s extensive knowledge of business history and his familiarity with Lustron kept me wondering what might have been. He always thought that the houses were well conceived and that the company could have revolutionized the housing industry. After I moved off to school, we still discussed how the houses in our neighborhood were faring—one great, the other not so well, although at this writing they are both in fine shape once again and occupied by families that appreciate their significance.

I’d like to tell you that the Lustron house and the company that created it made a crucial contribution to alleviating the enduring shortage of affordable single-family housing in the United States during the post–World War II era. It made an impact but was ultimately unsuccessful in its quest to apply innovative production technologies to the mass housing market. And that’s unfortunate, since technological advances in the housing industry have been slow to evolve and have been less than effectively used to expand opportunities for affordable home ownership across the income spectrum. The 2,000 or so Lustrons that remain of the 2,500 produced in the late 1940s are thus relegated to living museum status, physical relics of a road not taken and an opportunity unrealized. They are magnificent artifacts of a time when a confident postwar society set its sights on the housing crisis in much the same way as it approached war production. Indeed, outproducing the Axis powers in some ways proved an easier task than revolutionizing the entrenched economic, political, and social elements of the American housing system.

Scattered primarily throughout the Midwest, Lustron houses have been the focus
of considerable media attention in recent years. An Emmy-winning PBS documentary, stories on cable television home shows, numerous websites, and homeowners’ conventions have kept Lustron in the public eye. People are still attracted to the novelty of a house made of porcelain-enameled steel that looked like a typical ranch house but contained numerous time and space-saving features to facilitate “modern living.” Lustrons were also one of the few “houses of the future” that actually got beyond the drafting table, but it was for a future that never arrived. This makes them endurably interesting, especially to those like me who find the history of “yesterday’s tomorrows” particularly intriguing.

I’ve been in many Lustrons over the years, but one encounter during my graduate school years focused my interest on this project. While writing a history of a Cincinnati company that owned the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Company, the technical progenitor of Lustron, I met a number of people who were present at Lustron’s genesis. Several employees at ChiVit, as it was then called, vividly recounted the Lustron era and the excitement over the prospect of contributing to and profiting from a new type of housing production. A casual conversation turned into a dissertation and, finally, to this book.

The journey was neither expeditious nor without frequent detours, and I have accumulated many debts along the way. My professors in the history department of the University of Cincinnati, especially Zane Miller and Gene Lewis, provided valuable guidance at the inception of the project and throughout the dissertation process. As a visiting faculty member at Northern Kentucky University, I was fortunate to tap the expertise of colleagues Mike Adams, Frederic Krome, and Eric Jackson. In my current job in the Evelyn T. Stone University College at Roosevelt University, I am indebted to the university and college administration for supporting this and a number of other forthcoming projects. Special thanks go to my faculty colleagues Mike Bryson, Mike Maly, Jack Metzgar, and Dan Headrick.

Additional thanks are due Zane Miller in his role as editor of the Urban Life and Landscape Series at the Ohio State University Press. I’m sure Zane thought he was rid of me at the hooding, but his consistent support and thoughtful direction throughout the revision process once again demonstrated that he has few peers in the field of urban history and fewer still as teacher, mentor, and friend. I also extend my gratitude to Heather Lee Miller of the Ohio State University Press for providing valuable assistance during the revision and production process, to peer reviewers Kristin Szylvian and Carolyn Loeb, as well as to other members of the Press staff who assisted in the production of this book.

My parents have my enormous gratitude for their consistent encouragement and support throughout the years, and my wife deserves special thanks for countless kindnesses initiated and returned over our many happy years together. This book is for my family—immediate, extended, past, present, and future.