

Nomination Report for the Harold Hess Lustron House

**421 Durie Avenue, Block 1003 Lot 21
Closter, New Jersey**



The Hess Family standing in front of the newly completed Lustron, 1950

**THE CLOSTER HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
March, 2013**

There are only two Lustron houses standing in Bergen County today: the Harold Hess Lustron house in Closter and the William Wittmer Lustron house in Alpine. The Borough of Alpine does not have a historic preservation ordinance, so its Lustron house could be demolished or altered at any time without any oversight. There are only eleven Lustron houses still standing in the entire state of New Jersey.

DESCRIPTION:

The Harold Hess Lustron House is a two-bedroom, one bathroom “Westchester Deluxe” model Lustron house with an attached breezeway connecting to a one-car garage. The one-story house measures 1,085 square feet and is constructed entirely of prefabricated porcelain enameled steel panels. The house rests on a concrete slab foundation. The rectangular yellow enameled steel house has a dark gray tile roof.

The house is a one-story, side-gabled, ranch type home. The exterior of the house has very little ornamentation. The exterior yellow steel panels, which each measure 2' X 2', along with the enameled steel chimney panels, living room bay window and decorative metal spiral porch roof support, all give this house its distinct appearance. The breezeway has been enclosed with brick and wood and has aluminum storm windows. The one-car garage measures 15' X 21' and is of traditionally framed balloon construction. It is covered in matching yellow 2' X 2' steel panels and has the same dark gray roof tiles as the house.

The Harold Hess Lustron house is sited diagonally on a corner lot with the main façade facing the intersection of Legion Place and Durie Avenue. The main

façade is in line with the breezeway and garage. The side facing Durie Avenue has the projecting bay window.

Interior features include built-in wall furniture and closet space; between the dining room area and kitchen is a buffet with shelves and drawers on one side and kitchen cabinets with shelves and drawers on the other side. The built-in steel unit between the living room and master bedroom contains a mirrored bookcase on one side and a built-in mirrored vanity and counter top with drawers and closet doors on the other side. Exterior and interior wall corners are rounded and contribute to the clean, streamlined look of the Lustron home. All interior walls are covered with porcelain enameled steel panels measuring 2' X 8'. The panels are vertically scored to give a paneled appearance. The kitchen and bathroom panels are yellow and all of the other wall panels are a light gray color. Ceiling panels throughout measure 4' X 4' and are white. All cabinets in the kitchen, bedrooms and bathroom are light gray. The two bedrooms and bathroom all have their original steel porcelain-enameled flush gray pocket doors which slide on overhead tracks. All closet and storage doors are of the bypass sliding type. The bathroom retains its original stamped steel bathtub measuring 5.5 feet in length. All of the kitchen cabinets and hardware are original.

HISTORY:

The Harold Hess Lustron House was built in 1950 and was one of 2,498 Lustrons manufactured and sold in the United States by the Lustron Corporation between 1948 and 1950.

At the close of World War II, the United States faced the most severe housing shortage in its history. In an effort to build as much as possible and as fast as possible, Congress voted to fund research into prefabricated housing, and firms specializing in prefabricated houses were rewarded with access to natural resources and rationed steel-making materials. Porcelain enamel became popular for style as well as substance. It perfectly suited the design sensibilities of the era, giving a sleek,

streamlined look to gas stations, hamburger stands (most famously White Castles), and other utilitarian structures.

A leading manufacturer of the coated panels was the Porcelain Products Company, a subsidiary of the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Company. Founded in 1919, "Chicago Vit" contributed to World War II by producing tank armor for turrets and commander domes. The company hired Carl Strandlund, a Swedish-born engineer, inventor, and entrepreneur, to retool and run the plant for the war effort. His innovations dramatically sped up production, raising the national profile of the company and himself. He was soon promoted to executive vice president and general manager. Strandlund received a patent for his innovation, the porcelain steel panel.

Carl Strandlund went on to form the Lustron Corporation. Originally requesting steel to produce all-steel gas stations for the Standard Oil Company, Strandlund changed his plan and proposed building housing units, in order to gain government approval. The design was created by Illinois architects Roy Blass and Morris Beckman. Based on an estimate that one hundred houses could be produced in nine months at a retail price of \$7,000.00 each, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation rewarded a \$12.5 million dollar loan for production. The first Lustron factory was located in a Curtis-Wright facility near Columbus, Ohio. It later moved to the Tucker Automobile Plant in Columbus, Ohio. In order to make manufacturing more efficient, Strandlund based production on the process of the automobile assembly line.

The Lustron Corporation ultimately offered eight models commercially, which varied in number of bedrooms (two or three), size, and amenities. Color options for the exterior panels were "surf blue," "maize yellow," "desert tan," or "dove gray." Lustron accessories included screen doors, a storm-door insert, a combination storm-screen door, and storm windows, all in aluminum; steel venetian blinds in ivory; a picture hanger kit; and an attic fan. The company encouraged

homeowners to personalize their homes by screening in porches and adding breezeways. By 1949, Lustron was also selling garage panel packages. Unlike the house panels, which were part of a self-supporting structure, the garage panels had to be attached to a traditional wood-frame structure.

The Lustron Corporation operated from 1946 to 1950. Production began in 1948, but by 1950, production problems and a corruption scandal brought the company to a halt. The factory was closed and the equipment sold or scrapped. Lustron filed for bankruptcy. All in all, only about 2,680 of these unique homes were built. Sadly, it is estimated that only 1,500 of these houses survive today. Each year, dozens are lost to demolition, neglect, and unsympathetic changes and alterations.

In New Jersey, only sixteen Lustron houses were sold, and only three were known to have existed in Bergen County. In Closter, there were two Lustron homes, but the one formerly situated at 22 Division Street was demolished in 1998, leaving the Harold Hess Lustron as the only remaining Lustron in the Borough. The only other remaining Lustron house in Bergen County is in the Borough of Alpine, at 19 DuBois Avenue. There are only eleven Lustrons still standing in the entire state.

THE HESS FAMILY HOME:

In 1949, Mr. Harold Hess, a returning World War II veteran who was recently married, saw a model of a Lustron house at the Palisades Amusement Park in Fort Lee, New Jersey. He purchased the “Westchester Deluxe” model home from Art Padula, owner of the Better Living Homes Lustron franchise in Maplewood, New Jersey, in 1950. Mr. Hess, along with engineer Jim Mortimer, faced six months of planning and zoning board meetings in Fort Lee, New Jersey, where Mr. Hess had originally planned to situate his house. Hess failed to obtain the necessary building permits in Fort Lee, so he looked to the northeast sections of Bergen County, where less development and more relaxed building codes provided better opportunity for

him. Hess built his home at the corner of Durie Avenue and Legion Place in Closter. He lived there and raised a family, and remained the owner until 2000.

HISTORIC DESIGNATION RATIONALE:

The Closter Master Plan, Historic Element, adopted on April 6, 2011, states: “As Closter faces the challenges of a complex 21st century, the town’s historic fabric and resources will likely come under strong pressures for change. The stories behind these structures combine to form our collective history, and retaining them keeps their stories accessible, reminding us how we got here. . . Preservation of historic sites and districts serves to promote the aesthetic, environmental, cultural and economic values within the Borough and retains the authentic character of place.”

The Hess Lustron house was added to the National Register of Historic Places and the New Jersey Register of Historic Places in 2000. There are only two Lustron houses standing in Bergen County in 2013, the Harold Hess Lustron house in Closter and the William Wittmer Lustron house in Alpine. There are only eleven Lustron houses still extant in the entire state of New Jersey.

The Closter Planning Board, in its resolution of DENIAL for subdivision of the property, noted that “ The board heard testimony to the effect and took judicial notice of the fact that the Hess Lustron house is considered to be of historical significance,” and that “The Board was unconvinced that the application advanced the purposes of the Municipal Land Use Act by preserving a historical site . . . The Applicant proposed to remove the Hess Lustron house from the site and therefore, it was not in any sense being preserved on site.” (Resolution, page 2, 3)

The Harold Hess Lustron house meets Closter’s local designation criteria as established in Closter Borough Code Chapter 35, Sections 54 (A) subsections 1 and 4.

Section 54(A)(1) recognizes the significance of buildings “associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the Borough of Closter by

reflecting or exemplifying the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community.” The production of the Lustron house is significant in that it contributes to the broad patterns of the suburban housing development in 20th Century American history and is especially important for its association with the post World War II prefabrication efforts of the U.S. government and industry and with the technological innovations to accommodate the increased housing needs of a post-war nation.

Section 54(A)(4) recognizes the importance of buildings “That embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; that represent the work of a master; that possess high artistic values; or that represent a significant distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.” Since the Lustron house is of a highly innovative and unique style, it qualifies for local historic designation under this category. The Hess Lustron retains a high degree of architectural integrity; as noted, most of its original features are still intact. The exterior of the building has seen changes to the breezeway (it was enclosed), and only minor changes have been made to the interior. As stated above, the Lustron home has become increasingly rare, as more are demolished every year, and since so few were built in the post-World War II era.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Borough of Closter, Planning Board, Resolution of Denial of Minor Subdivision and Ancillary Variances, Lot 21 Block 1003, 421 Durie Avenue, May 4, 2005.

Borough of Closter: Historic Preservation Plan Element, Adopted April 6, 2011, page 7.

Garbe Morillo, Patricia. National Register of Historic Places, Registration form for the Harold Hess Lustron, January 2000.

Garbe Morillo, Patricia. Closter and Alpine: Images of America. Arcadia Press 2001.

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, “Lustron Homes,” Historic Preservation Planning Bulletin, October-December, 1966

Fine, Adrian Scott. Letter to the Closter Mayor and Council, National Trust for Historic Preservation, February 16, 2004.

KDN Films, *Lustron – The House America’s Been Waiting For*. Documentary film, 2008

O’Connell, Kim A. “Loving Lustrons,” National Trust for Historic Preservation Preservation magazine, July/August 2007.

Samuels, Sam Hooper: “The ‘House of Tomorrow’ Now a Retro Trophy,” The New York Times, August 2, 2001.

www.lustronpreservation.org, a website formed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

APPENDICES:

I. MAP



Location of Harold Hess Lustron House, 421 Durie Avenue, Closter, NJ, 07624

II. HISTORICAL PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

THE LUSTRON *Westchester* BELIEVE TWO-BEDROOM HOME

A 6-ft., fan-roofed extension of the porch increases its dimensions to 12 x 12, a convenient size to screen or enclose if desired. It provides a sheltered passage to the garage. The 1' bathroom house and garage becomes a pleasantly private patio. Porch extension may vary as the lot is wider or narrower. Minimum width lot for this plan with single garage is 67'.

Note that the garage projects beyond the front of the house, lending interest to the facade. The porch extension may be practically flat. The slight slope should be toward the rear.

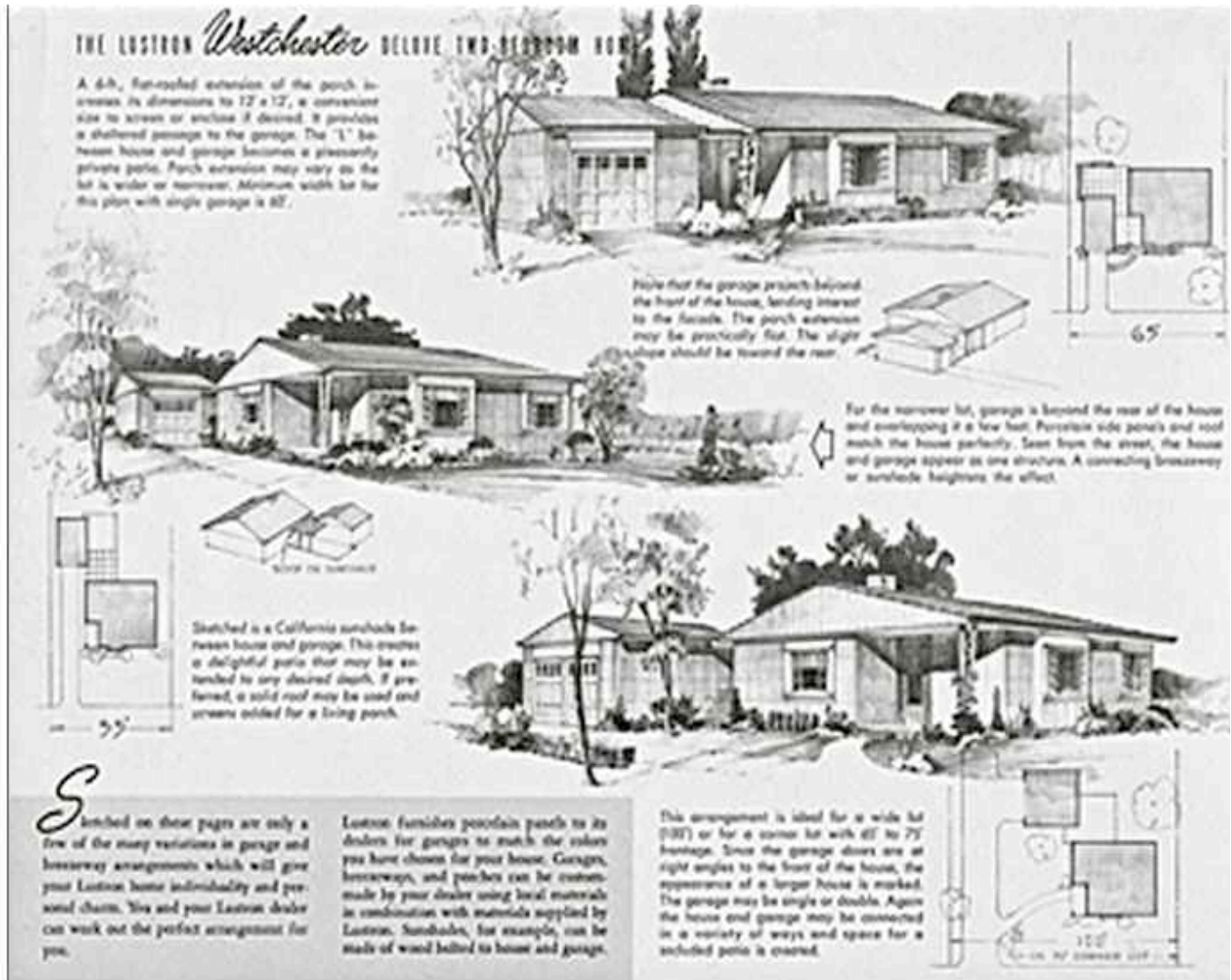
For the narrower lot, garage is located the rear of the house and overlapping it a few feet. Porcelain side panels and roof match the house perfectly. Seen from the street, the house and garage appear as one structure. A connecting breezeway or sunshade heightens the effect.

Sketches a California sunshade between house and garage. This creates a delightful patio that may be extended to any desired depth. If preferred, a solid roof may be used and screens added for a living porch.

Sketches on these pages are only a few of the many variations in garage and breezeway arrangements which will give your Lustron home individuality and personal charm. You and your Lustron dealer can work out the perfect arrangement for you.

Lustron furnishes porcelain panels to its dealers for garages to match the colors you have chosen for your house. Garages, breezeways, and porches can be custom-made by your dealer using local materials in combination with materials supplied by Lustron. Sunshades, for example, can be made of wood bolted to house and garage.

This arrangement is ideal for a wide lot (80') or for a corner lot with 67' to 77' frontage. Since the garage doors are at right angles to the front of the house, the appearance of a larger house is marked. The garage may be single or double. Again the house and garage may be connected in a variety of ways and space for a secluded patio is created.



The Westchester was the most popular Lustron Model

Brochure regarding the Lustron, Westchester model – screen shot taken from www.lustronpreservation.org



THE MASTER BEDROOM

Of all the rooms of the home, the master bedroom is perhaps closest to the feminine heart—away from distractions and the mechanics of housekeeping. We have designed it as a companionable room for two. Within its walls are restful beauty, a touch of glamour, and amazing utility—the kind you've dreamed about but never thought you could have.

Very often the bedroom is the "afterthought" of the architect's plan. Closets are inclined to be woefully inadequate and there never seems to be enough usable wall space for furniture. To cut down furniture needs and to increase room area, one entire wall of the Lustron master bedroom is devoted to step-saving, space-saving and money-saving built-in features. A smart vanity is completely surrounded by drawers, cabinets and closets. A large mirror (21 sq. ft.) is included. Overhead cabinets line the wall at ceiling level. Wide, deep wardrobe cabinets reach to the floor on either side. All of this is in addition to the large closet space on the adjoining wall—practically unlimited storage capacity for normal needs. Entrance door, closet doors and wardrobe cabinet doors are of the "sliding" type for greater convenience.

The room itself is large—12 by 12 feet—and will accommodate twin beds, if desired. A large window on one wall and two upper level "port type" windows at the rear give plenty of light and provide good ventilation.

And again, as throughout all rooms of the house, the subdued beauty of Lustron's porcelain enamel finish adds a dignity and charm that will last forever.

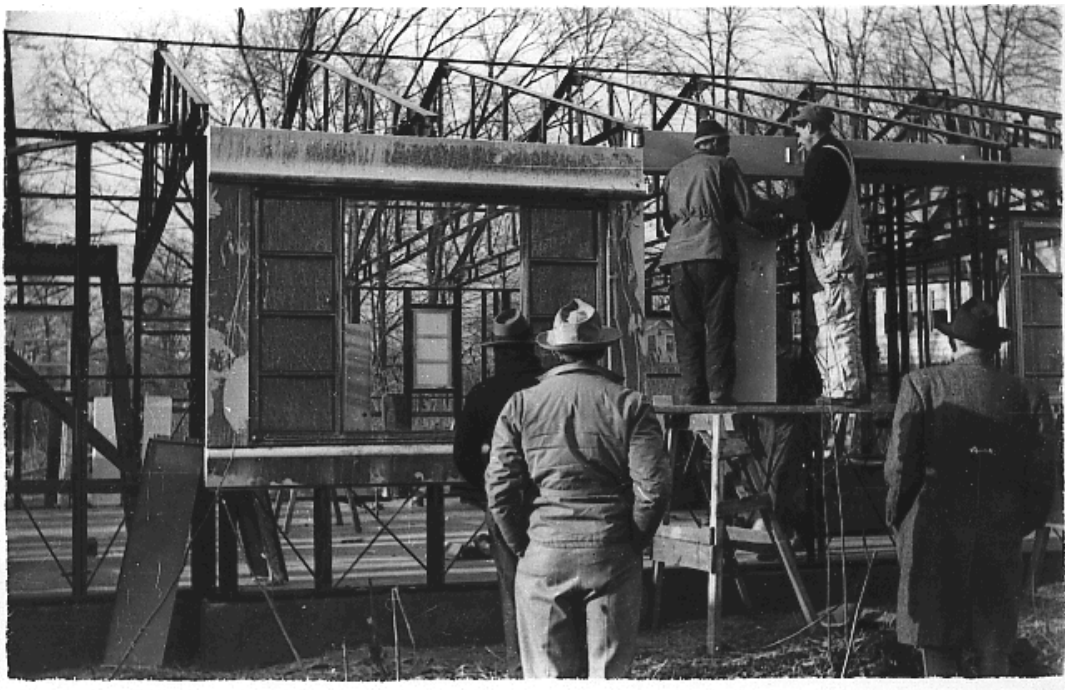


Pages from Brochure: "The Lustron Home"

III. PHOTOS



The Lustron Truck at the Harold Hess property 1950 – this truck could carry all of the components for building the house



Process of construction, 1950



Framing - 1950



The Hess Family standing in front of the newly completed Lustron, 1950



Photo courtesy of Closter Motors – a gift to them from Harold Hess – early photo
Of the Harold Hess Lustron House

Lustron Living Room The Lustron living room featured built-in bookcases under a picture window and other built-in shelves. Radiant panel heating was used throughout the home.



Lustron Dining Room The Lustron dining room included a built-in china cabinet and a large picture window.



THE LUSTRON INTERIOR (Kitchen) The Lustron includes built-in metal cabinets that come with the house, and a combination washing machine-dishwasher, and sink.

The three preceding photos were taken of the Hess Lustron interior prior to Mr. Hess' sale of the property, ca. 2001

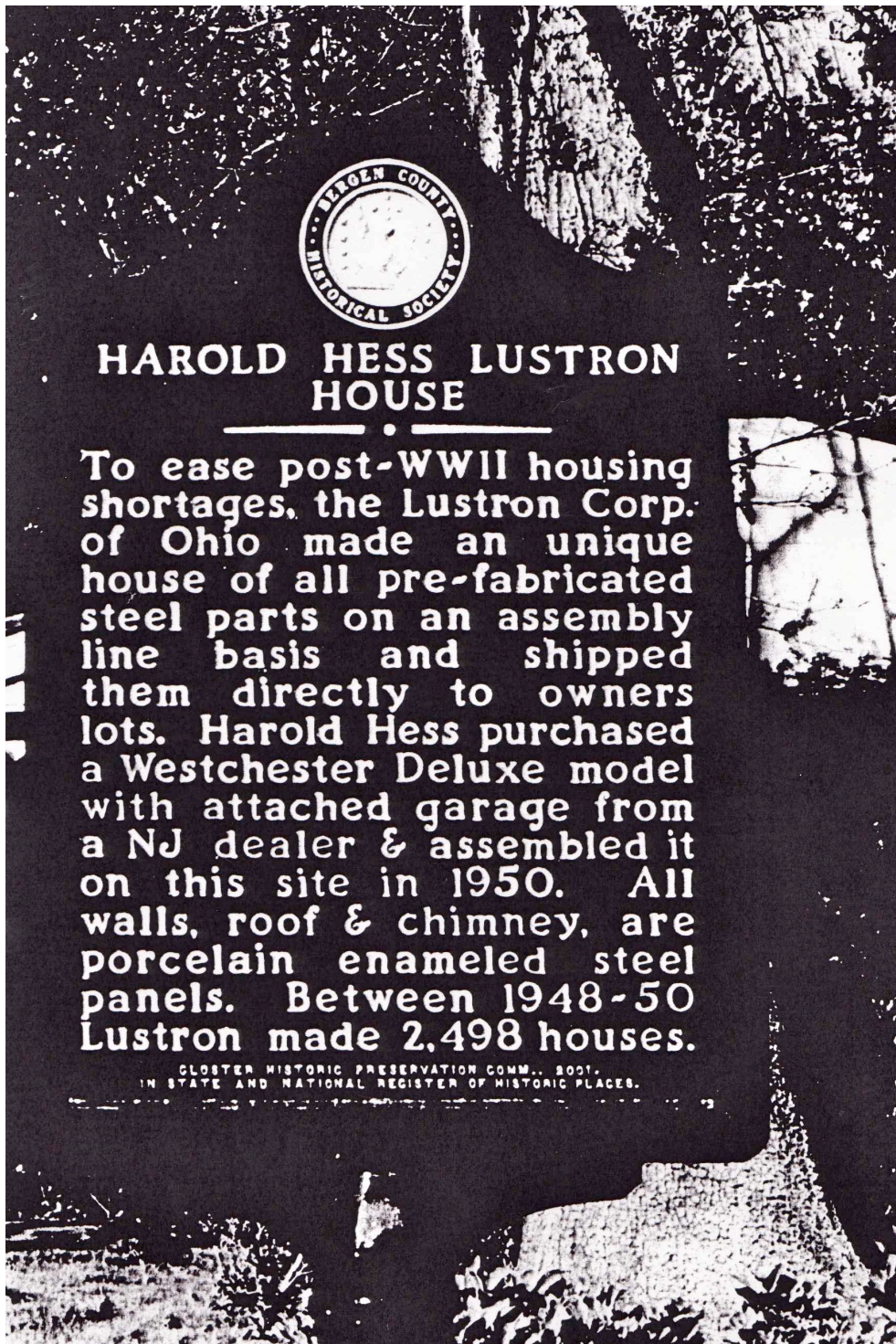


DON HORSEY

Marker dedication

The Lustron home property of Harold Hess, far left, is finally sporting an historical marker, which designates the uniqueness of the prefabricated steel house in Closter. At the dedication with Hess are Doug Radick, Closter Preservation Commission member, Closter Historian Pat Garbe Morillo, also a commission member, Councilwoman Sophie Heymann, Mayor Fred Pitofsky and Councilman Michael Hochron.

Suburbanite 2001



Text of Bergen County Historical Society marker that stands in front of the Hess Lustron House in Closter



Harold Hess Lustron -Spring 2010



January 2013



Richard Schmidt (owner) and Bobbie Bouton Goldberg, historian, in front of exhibit about the Lustron. Closter Public Library, November 2011

IV. TESTIMONIALS



NATIONAL TRUST
for HISTORIC PRESERVATION

February 16, 2004

Mayor and Members of the Borough Council
c/o Borough Clerk
Closter Borough Hall
295 Closter Dock Road
Closter, NJ 07624

Re: Harold Hess Lustron House, 421 Durie Avenue, Closter, NJ.

Dear Honorable Mayor Pitofsky and Council President Linda Albelli,

On behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, I am writing to support the local historic designation of the 1950 Harold Hess Lustron House. This rare example of a small, one-story house illustrates a unique mid-20th century solution to the nationwide housing crisis of the 1950s. As a house type, the Lustron is extremely unique as well as historic. For this reason, the Harold Hess Lustron House was listed in both the New Jersey and National Register of Historic Places. Its designation by the Borough Council at the local level would grant much-needed protection for this one-of-a-kind and potentially threatened Closter residence.

With an emphasis on new technology and production methods, the Lustron is representative of post-World War II housing, designed for returning veterans. It is an example of a new mass-produced construction method in which all of its three thousands parts arrived on a single truck and were assembled on site over several days. Architecturally, it is significant for its modern design and ranch-type open layout. The Harold Hess Lustron House, particularly, boasts a high degree of integrity, retaining nearly all of its original historic fabric and features. Nationwide, there are only about 2,100 Lustron houses remaining as production ceased in late 1950.

According to Lustron Corporation sales records, only sixteen of their houses were sold in New Jersey. Of these, only eleven have been identified to date in the entire state, and only three within Bergen County. Of these, one was demolished in 1998, making the Harold Hess Lustron House one of only two known extant Lustron houses in all of Bergen County. With only a small number of these houses produced, the loss of a Lustron has an enormous impact. The significance and increasingly threatened status of Lustrons also prompted the inclusion on Preservation New Jersey's 2000 list of "New Jersey's 10 Most Endangered Historic Sites." This statewide preservation organization cited the Harold Hess House specifically as vulnerable to demolition due to its modest size but high property value yield.

Letter urging designation of the Hess Lustron house from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The Closter Council at that time denied historic landmark status to the house.

Mayor and Members of the Closter Borough Council
February 16, 2004
Page 2

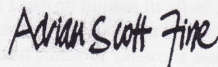
Often times, smaller historic houses are demolished to make way for newer, usually much larger, residences that are incompatible with the scale and character of the historic neighborhood. This is especially true for historic houses situated on oversized and expansive lots. Commonly referred to as teardowns, there is real concern that the Harold Hess Lustron House is perceived as a "teardown target." In addition, the relatively young age of this residence as a product from the "recent past" may lead some to view it as expendable and unworthy of historic preservation. Neither of these factors should outweigh the goal and purpose of local historic preservation programs, such as the one established by the Borough of Closter.

Local historic designation programs are extremely important mechanisms for ensuring that our significant historic places and sites are not discarded or overlooked. There is some precedent for designating Lustrons at the local level already, such as in Kansas City, KS and Hammond, IN. More than 2,500 communities nationwide now have local historic preservation programs and commissions in place. Because of the long-standing existence and development of these types of programs, there is a considerable base of materials and knowledge that could be of assistance to Closter, and especially in regards to considerations about the designation of the Harold Hess Lustron House.

There are feasible approaches for preserving an historic site and considering changes and alterations in the future, including new construction. The Trust considers local designation of the Harold Hess Lustron House as a critically-important key step. Local designation allows a process for a discussion to determine and identify alternatives that can best preserve a site but also consider the full interests of the property owner. Without designation, this process or consideration of viable alternatives is less likely to occur.

But the primary issue at stake now is the site's preservation. The Harold Hess Lustron House is a unique part of not only the country's history and architecture, but especially of Bergen County's. Preserving what is special and unique to a community, and ensuring that it will be around for future generations to experience is necessary for giving our neighborhoods their defining characteristics. Therefore we urge you to support the local historic designation of the Harold Hess Lustron House. Please contact me if the National Trust can be of any assistance as you consider this pending ordinance.

Sincerely,



Adrian Scott Fine
Director, Northeast Field Office

cc: Ron Emrich, Preservation New Jersey
Dorothy Guzzo, New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office

Page two of the National Trust letter. Its urgency is even more underscored nine years later.

V. **PLANNING BOARD RESOLUTION OF DENIAL FOR SUBDIVISION OF PROPERTY**

**RESOLUTION OF THE CLOSTER PLANNING BOARD
DENYING MINOR SUBDIVISION APPROVAL WITH
ANCILLARY VARIANCES TO HESS FOR
LOT 21 IN BLOCK 1003
421 DURIE AVENUE, CLOSTER, NJ**

WHEREAS, The Estate of Harold Hess, owner, as Applicant, applied to the Closter Planning Board for Subdivision approval with ancillary variances; and

WHEREAS, the Closter Planning Board conducted a duly noticed public hearing on January 27, 2005 which was continued on to March 31, 2005; and

WHEREAS, the Board reviewed the Application for Development; the Minor Subdivision Plat prepared by Hubschman Engineering dated August 16, 2004, last revised to October 22, 2004; the reports of the Board Engineer dated October 5, 2004 and October 28, 2004; the reports of 1) The Closter Police Department, 2) The Fire Subcode Official, 3) the Construction Code Official, 4) the Environmental Commission objecting on the grounds of the property's proximity to the waterway and the failure of the lots to meet minimum zone requirements, 5) the Shade Tree Commission; and the Board heard and considered the testimony of the witnesses.

WHEREAS, the Board has determined that based upon a totality of the evidence the application warrants a denial.

NOW THEREFORE, the Closter Planning Board denied the application for Minor Subdivision Approval with Ancillary Variances based upon the following findings of fact and conclusions of law.

THE SITE

1. The Site is a lot on the northeast corner of Legion Place and Durie Avenue. The Lot has a total area of 26,734.40 square feet and consists of .61 of an acre less than the minimum of one acre to apply for a subdivision required by ordinance. The Lot is currently developed with one single-family dwelling and is in the Residence Area B Zone. The lot exceeds the zone minimum for lot area.

2. The single-family dwelling currently on the site is known as the Hess Lustron house. The board heard testimony to the effect and took judicial notice of the fact that the Hess Lustron house is considered to be of historical significance. The Tenakill Brook, a Category 1 waterway, is within 200 feet of the site.

DECISION OF THE BOARD

3. The Board was unconvinced that the applicant advanced the purpose of the Zoning and Use Law by preserving a historical site or by advancing the public interest.

THE APPLICATION

3. The Applicant proposes to subdivide the property into two lots for the development and sale with one new single-family dwelling on each lot. There will be two new single-family dwellings to replace the Hess Lustron house. The Hess Lustron house is a prefabricated porcelainized steel structure which will be taken down and removed from the site.

4. The subdivision requires a number of variances. The entire site is less than one acre and therefore lacks the minimum lot size to apply for a subdivision. The lot has an area of only 26,734 square feet.

5. The Application also seeks other bulk variances for the resulting lots and proposed dwellings. The proposed dwelling on proposed lot 21.01 seeks a variance from the front yard setback with 36.66 required and only 25 feet proposed. Both proposed lots are deficient in required minimum lot width. Lot 21.01 has a lot width of only 79.23 feet and lot 21.02 has a lot width of 98.27 feet. The zone minimum is 100 feet.

6. The Board found that the application also sought a variance for encroachment into the minimum rear yard for Lot 21.01 because Durie Avenue is a County Collector Street and the rear yard is considered to be opposite Durie Avenue. The current proposed building footprint is only 15 feet from the rear lot line requiring an additional variance.

7. As positive criteria for the variances, the Applicant contends that the removal of the Lustron House and its relocation elsewhere is sufficient justification under the Municipal Land use Law by promoting preservation of historic sites pursuant to N.J.S.A. 40:55D-2(j). The Applicant also set forth other justifications as set forth on the record.

DECISION OF THE BOARD

8. The Board was unconvinced that the application advanced the purposes of the Municipal Land Use Law by preserving a historical site or by advancing any other purpose of the Municipal Land Use Act. The Applicant proposed to remove the Hess Lustron house from the site and therefore, it was not in any sense being preserved on site. In addition the Applicant did not propose to reassemble the Hess Lustron house in the Borough of Closter or at any other specific site in the area which might have created a benefit to the community. The Board also found no hardship.

9. The Board found no other positive criteria compelling for the granting of the variances. There are no positive criteria for encroaching in both the front and the rear yard setback for proposed Lot 21.01 in Block 1003.

10. The negative impact of permitting a subdivision with less than one acre and the construction of more dwellings within 300 feet of a class (1) waterway was substantial without any benefit to the Borough of Closter from the development.

11. The Board found that to grant the subdivision would substantially impair the intent of the zoning ordinance as to the one-acre minimum for

subdivisions, minimum lot width, and front and rear yard setbacks. The Board also found that the granting of the variances under the facts of this case would substantially impair the intent of the Master Plan by allowing more development than would be permitted if the zone standards were adhered to.

12. The Board denied the Minor Subdivision with Ancillary Variances.

13. Notice of this denial shall be duly published as required by law, and copies of this resolution shall be provided to Applicant's attorney, and to the Closter governing body, Board Engineer, and Construction Code Official, and the owner of the record.

ATTEST:

CLOSTER PLANNING BOARD

By: Secretary

Chair

Motion: Alan Dorfman

Seconded: Dr. Mark Maddaloni

Those in favor: Honorable Fred Pitofsky, Mayor, Leonard Sinowitz

Those opposed: Victoria Amitai, Councilwoman, John Lignos, Dr. Mark Maddaloni, Mohamed Ismail, Alan Dorfman

Abstaining: none

CERTIFIED COPY

Maria De Simone, Clerk

Adopted: 05-04-05