On the wall of any real-estate office in Phoenix is an aerial photo. We should etch the image on the tombstone of John F. Long.

In 1947, as a returning veteran, Long built a house for himself and his wife. Before they could move in, he sold it at a 50 percent profit. By 1956, his volume was a thousand houses a year at a time when the average builder built fewer than 10.

As a kid, I remember seeing billboards for John F. Long houses with a starting price of about $6,000. In the late '50s, I mentioned these billboards to Long, and he could tell me the names of the models, the prices at which they were sold and how many were delivered in various months in 1956.

Long was an American archetype: an unassuming man and organizational genius.

John F. Long was an unassuming man of modest means and education who was an organizational genius. He pioneered the use of things like the rolled curb, which allowed you to put any model home on any lot no matter where its driveway was located, and factory-built trusses packaged together for a single house and delivered on site in a "just in time" technique.

He was even an innovator in home finance — building houses on behalf of home buyers who each held shares in a co-op owning the entire subdivision.

This minimized interim financing costs and allowed lower down payments.

Long's impact went far beyond the design and construction of individual houses. Maryvale, named after his wife, began in 1953 as the first significant master-planned community in Arizona. He hired Los Angeles architect and planner Victor Gruen to lay out a master plan.

The design for Maryvale took our Jeffersonian grid and translated it into a planning module that became the basic building block of Phoenix: a square mile with a park and a school in the middle, surrounded by single-family homes and with shopping centers and apartments on each section-line corner.

This deceptively simple design meant that every house was less than half a mile to a park, a school and a grocery store. There are a lot of "new urbanist" thinkers today criticizing places like Maryvale, but these were walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

Between 1947 and 1975, John built 30,000 houses priced at no more than $30,000 each. In the '50s at a meeting of the mortgage banking association in Phoenix, one participant gushed, "I have no hesitancy in stating that in my opinion more house per dollar is delivered in the Phoenix area than in any other section of the country."

His was the formula that built this town.

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