A song written by Malvina Reynolds in 1962 became a hit for Pete Seeger in 1963. *The first verse follows:

Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky,
Little boxes, little boxes,
Little boxes, all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.

The song was a commentary on the housing developments that were built in the late 1940s and 1950s to accommodate the World War II and Korean War veterans who had married and needed homes in which to raise their families. Many of these developments had dozens of identical homes with identical floor plans (photo 1) and made of the least expensive materials available. Often, the only variation was in the paint colors.
Several fire service authors have suggested becoming familiar with these neighborhoods and model homes. If search and rescue or interior fire attack was needed, there was little possibility of firefighters becoming disoriented because all of the houses on a street had the same layout. A typical layout might be the following:

- Through the front door is the living room, with the stairway to the second floor on the left and the stairway to the basement stairway below it;
- the kitchen and dining area is straight ahead;
- the bathroom is on the second floor at the top of the stairs; and
- bedrooms on either side.

This was good advice that has served the fire service well during the past 50 years. However, you must remember that these houses were small by today’s standards; these houses today are 60 to 70 years old. Many of them have additions, and most of them have been remodeled at least once.

Even though these houses were built cheaply, they were platform-framed using sawn lumber joists and studs. At that time, sawn lumber was likely to be full-dimension unplanned wood. Planed lumber was also available; a 2 × 4 actually measured 1.625 inches × 3.625 inches. Plywood was the only commonly used form of manufactured
lumber. This is the “legacy” construction that Underwriters Laboratories and National Institute of Standards and Technology has used in fire comparison tests with several types of lightweight construction methods using manufactured wood materials. Although many of these houses were finished on the inside with gypsum drywall board, some used lath and plaster.

The additions to the original construction and remodeling are likely to have used I-joists, wood trusses, plywood, oriented strand board, sheet metal joist hangers, laminated veneer lumber and 2 × 4 lumber measuring 1½ × 3½ inches.

We can no longer depend on the identical layouts in houses in these neighborhoods as we did in the past; and we can no longer assume the patterns of fire behavior from house to house. A fire in an addition is likely to behave differently that a fire in the original part of the structure; and remodeled areas supported by modern lightweight materials and construction methods are likely to collapse more quickly than the original structure.

Although it is possible that some of these houses are unchanged from the day when they were built, it is more likely that there have been significant changes. Perhaps the stairway to the second floor was moved into an addition, and the stairway opening closed with lightweight construction materials (photo 2).
For their own safety, firefighters responding to one of these homes must assume that it has changed since it was built, and that lightweight construction materials have been substituted somewhere inside.

*Copyright 1962 Schroder Music Company; renewed 1990. Internet search for “Little Boxes on the Hillside” for complete lyrics and music.

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