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Living Small

Robert Boucheron · Wednesday, September 14th, 2016

The average size of a new single-family house in the United States has more than doubled since 1950. It grew from less than 1,000 square feet to 2,500 square feet in 2007, according to the United States Census Bureau. Since then, the figure has dropped slightly. While home size grew, lower and middle class income remained stagnant, and personal debt soared in the form of mortgages. As a nation, we were living beyond our means.

Even before the 2008 recession, though, some American designers and home buyers showed a preference for smaller houses. In 1997, Sarah Susanka published *The Not So Big House*, a book on "tailoring your home for the way you really live." An architect, Susanka elaborated the point that architects have always made: build quality, not quantity. She challenged the connection between house size and personal ego by asking her clients and then her readers: "Why do you want so much space? How much space do you actually need?"

Very large houses and unique luxury properties have always been a niche market. At the best of times, they can take a long time to sell. In a recession, they may linger for years, and their prices plummet. At the other end of the price scale, existing small houses were the most active share of the market from 2007. Due to competition with foreclosed properties, prices in this range fell too, but not so far. In 2010, Charlottesville, Virginia realtor Pat Sury said:

> The buyers I see divide into two groups, older and younger. The older group is retiring, downsizing, often moving here from out of town. They want good construction instead of lots of square feet. They are buying high-end condominiums and attached houses. They like in-town locations, which tend to have smaller lots. The younger people, families with children, are looking at houses that omit the formal spaces—living and dining rooms—in favor of open floor plans. Both groups want green design, which often means smaller house size.

Most home sales are of existing stock, and housing typically passes down the economic scale. Larger existing houses will go to families that want them, often younger and immigrant. Average family size has been shrinking for decades, as people have fewer children, or the children grow up and leave the nest, or the family is a couple or a single person. The 2010 United States Census gives the average family size as 2.59 persons. Single-person households are now 27% of the total, up from 13% in 1960.

For the relatively small new-house market, then, retirees, empty-nesters, and one- or two-person households are a growing share. These people do not want to maintain more house than they need,

or pay energy bills and real estate taxes for it. They are prudent about what they spend, they invest only part of their wealth in real estate, and they know about construction. They have learned from experience. Then again, the Quaker-Puritan strain in Canadian and American culture makes some homeowners feel that restraint is a virtue. Excess and ostentation, enshrined in the McMansion, are out. Good taste is in.

The finished area may be less, but buyers still want features. The new small house typically has an upgraded kitchen, a luxurious master bath, and a high-performance heating and cooling system. Hardwood and ceramic tile floors are considered standard, not an upgrade from carpet and vinyl. Appliances, light fixtures, cabinets and hardware are more pleasing to the eye and made to last longer. On the exterior, durable materials like fiber-cement plank, brick, and composite (a rot-resistant wood product) are preferred to vinyl and aluminum siding. Windows and doors, a large part of any construction budget, are ample and of high quality, name brands instead of no-name vinyl. Here, green design comes to the fore, favoring natural light and sealing air leaks to conserve energy.

The small house, then, is not all about saving money. It is also about style. Cottages, cabins, and diminutive dwellings of all kinds exert a fascination. The quirky cottages of Carmel, California, the Colonial-era houses of Cape Cod, and the bungalow (originally an import from India) are endlessly photographed and imitated. With their hand-crafted details, fine wood species, art glass, custom ceramic tile, and carefully chosen “boulders” in foundations and chimneys, these houses can be expensive.

Among books on the subject, a personal favorite is *The American Bungalow 1880-1930,* by Clay Lancaster. This is the definitive history, with a wealth of photographs and drawings. The idea of the bungalow was so popular among all classes that it led to large houses of two and three stories. The small, mass-produced bungalow with the low, spreading roof is more typical. Dover Publications reprints catalog books from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, showing hundreds of small, architecturally inventive houses, including bungalows.

Cottages by the Sea, by Linda Leigh Paul describes thirty-five “handmade homes of Carmel, America’s first artist colony” with color photographs. The town of Carmel is roughly midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. From fisherman shacks to architect-designed showplaces, the Carmel cottages today are a tourist attraction and an exclusive weekend getaway. Arched doors, rock walls, shingle roofs, and picturesque gables sprout everywhere. No two windows are alike, and there are plenty of them to take in the Pacific coast views.

The so-called tiny house movement takes size and cuteness to the limit. As promoted by Jay Shafer in his website and book, the Tumbleweed Tiny House Company has dozens of artfully crafted designs that resemble cabins, converted sheds and children’s playhouses. They are sold as prefab kits for the do-it-yourselfer, or as architectural plans. Shafer claims to have lived happily for years in a house of 89 square feet. His website shows models that range from 99 square feet up to 3-bedroom models of about 850 square feet, in styles that recall Carpenter Gothic and Craftsman.

A tiny house seems unsuitable for entertaining or raising a family. But as Shafer says, it will fit anywhere, and it is cheaper to build and maintain than a standard house. Some tiny houses are mounted on wheels, like trailers. And like trailers, they are anathema to municipal zoning departments, which prohibit them outright, or impose hefty fees for utility hookups, or require expensive foundations. Neighbors do not always like them, either. They fear that such a house will depress property values, become a low-rent property, and so on.

After Hurricane Katrina, architects produced a flood of cottage designs, with dimensions and details that recall the traditional housing that was destroyed. Meant to be affordable, and in some cases to be mass-produced, Katrina Cottages are often delightful exercises in scale and ingenuity. The good life can be lived in close quarters, they imply.

Historical reproductions and pattern book designs are another attempt to infuse small, inexpensive houses with architectural detail and period charm. The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia inspired a rash of such houses through the 1970s, some of which are due for a makeover. Christopher Alexander and others published a book in 1977 that remains popular, *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction.* There are several newer titles in the same vein, as well as *A Pattern Book for Neighborly Houses* put out by Habitat for Humanity and the Institute of Classical Architecture & Classical America, with "details and techniques for building and renovating neighborly houses."

The New Urbanism movement dates from the 1980s. Conceived as an antidote to suburban sprawl, with a magazine, several websites, and centers in California, Florida and New York, New Urbanist ideas are gaining acceptance in new housing development worldwide. Smaller lots favor smaller houses and more compact floor plans. The higher density, defined as dwelling units per acre, requires public sewers instead of private septic systems, which in turn means that town and county planning departments are involved. Green design advocates note that higher density encourages walking, reduces car trips, economizes utility lines, conserves energy, reduces global warming, and stimulates neighborliness. Social engineering aside, New Urbanist housing often has a neo-traditional look, which critics cite as backward.

Kentlands in Gaithersburg, Maryland, was a pioneer in this type of development. According to Michael Watkins, one of its designers, in a talk in Richmond in 2011, property values and resales have performed better in Kentlands than in nearby conventional housing. In central Virginia, examples of New Urbanist development include Belvedere north of Charlottesville and Old Trail west of Crozet. The new subdivisions contain a mix of housing types and prices, from garden apartments to attached houses to larger free-standing houses, with vest pocket public parks to compensate for the small private yards.

Attached houses, also called townhouses or rowhouses, are often disparaged as monotonous, cramped, and lacking in social tone. Yet townhouses can feature varied facades, front porches, and luxurious interiors. The townhouse is in fact the ultimate in urban living, backed by centuries of history. Built at higher density, it reduces sprawl, which reduces the infrastructure of roads and utilities, which reduces car trips and pollution, and so on. Multi-story design and party walls between houses reduce the exterior envelope, and therefore reduce the cost of construction and maintenance. As modern renovations show, the townhouse is capable of endless variations in interior layout. Stairs are inevitable, so this type of vertical living is not for everyone.

In the eastern United States, the nineteenth century was the heyday of the townhouse. Boston, New York, Philadephia, Baltimore, Washington, Charleston and Savannah all contain large areas of low-rise, compact and charming townhouses. Brick is the dominant material, with regional variations. New York is famous for brownstone facades, while Boston is known for bow windows, and Philadelphia for fine details and limestone trim. Restored and updated, these neighborhoods are now very desirable, and prices have risen beyond the reach of the middle class for which they were originally built.

Richmond, Virginia boasts examples of townhouse development in the Fan, Church Hill and Jackson Ward districts. Historic Richmond Foundation has published three books on them with large color photographs: *Richmond's Fan District*, by Drew St. J. Corneal; *Old Richmond Today*, by John G. Zehmer; and *The Church Hill Old and Historic Districts*, by John G. Zehmer. Restoration has come to Richmond, but it is still possible to buy low-priced houses in the Fan District, and in Jackson Ward, the historic African-American neighborhood. A local specialty is the wrought iron used for railings, porches and roof crests.

Garden apartments, like townhouses, suffered in the late twentieth century from a social stigma. They were a favorite type of government-sponsored public housing, and private commercial

projects were often cheaply built. Older complexes of both types have been upgraded, and in favored locations garden apartments have been converted to condominiums. When financial subsidies for rent or purchase are included, low-income residents can integrate with the rest of the population.

Living small may promote a social ideal, then, as well as an ecological benefit. The percent of Americans who own their home declined from 69% in 2004 to 65% today. Developing more affordable houses might slow the decline. Mixing rentals with owner-occupied units can also counteract segregation by income.

We choose how and where to live. Housing in turn affects how we behave. Young buyers and renters are flocking back to the central city, living in smaller houses and apartments, and taking part in civic life. The change may be the biggest story of the twenty-first century.

Top image: The Colorado mountains and sky work in harmony alongside the Linden 20.

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