

Are McMansions Going Out of Style?

Fred Bernstein, *The New York Times*, October 2, 2005
<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/02/realestate/02nati.html?pagewanted=all>

LAST year, McDonald's phased out its "supersize" French fries and soft drinks. Portions, it seems, had gone about as far as they could go.

Could the same be true of the supersized houses known as McMansions?

After more than 30 years of steady increase, the size of the typical American house appears to be leveling off, according to statistics gathered by the Census Bureau.

"The Generation X-ers who are becoming home buyers right now want more amenities - and they are willing to trade away space to get them," said Jerry Howard, vice president and chief executive of the National Association of Home Builders.

Sandy Kennedy, a real estate agent, said the house she and her husband, John, are building in Cheshire, Conn., will be around 3,500 square feet, which is larger than the national average but smaller than many homes in the area. "We could afford more, but we want to limit ourselves to spaces we'll really use," she said. "We're looking more at quality than quantity of space."

A few years ago, she might not have felt that way. The size of the average American house rose from about 1,500 square feet in 1970 to more than 2,300 square feet in 2001, with a particularly big growth spurt in the late 1990's.

But from 2001 to 2004, the growth practically halted. "That suggests that the size of the average house is stabilizing," said Gopal Ahluwalia, a statistician with the home builders' association. For the second quarter of 2005, the average new detached house measured 2,400 square feet, according to the Census Bureau.



Buyers are looking for expensive amenities like fine appliances instead of large spaces.



Seattle architect George Suyama says the homes he is being asked to design today are far more modest than those in the 1990's.



By utilizing glass, Mr. Suyama gives a small space the appearance of looking larger.

Mr. Howard says consumers are thinking less about space and more about "bells and whistles," including professional-style appliances and exotic woods with names like ipe and wenge.

Ms. Kennedy's house will have high ceilings, a Sub-Zero refrigerator and radiant heating embedded in the floor of a glass-walled "conservatory." And there will be lots of architectural moldings, her architect, Melanie Taylor of New Haven, said.

In a 2004 nationwide survey, the association asked homeowners: "For the same amount of money, which of the following would you choose: a bigger house with fewer amenities, or a smaller house with high quality products and amenities?" Only 37 percent of the 2,900 randomly selected respondents wanted the bigger house. Sixty-three percent said they would prefer the smaller house with more amenities.

In 2000, when the association asked the same question, the results were sharply different. Back then, 51 percent said they wanted the bigger house; 49 percent opted for the smaller-but-better house, Mr. Ahluwalia said. He added that he believes that even more will choose "the smaller house" when the association asks the same question in its next survey, in 2006.

Across the country, developers say they are seeing signs of that shift. "More and more people who come in are willing to talk about less space," said Catherine Horsey, a vice president of Urban Edge Developers in Dallas. She said new houses at the company's Urban Reserve development will average 2,500 square feet.

That, she said, is small for Dallas.

Of course, megahouses that outrage neighbors - and keep armies of contractors employed - are still going up in affluent areas. And companies like Toll Brothers that build thousands of homes each year say that some of their biggest models are also among their biggest sellers.

But even at the high end, where master bedrooms suites the size of tennis courts are common, there are signs that the trend toward bigness has abated.

Richard Warren, a planning consultant on the East End of Long Island, helps clients obtain zoning approval for new houses. In the last few years, he said, the number of people looking to build the largest permissible house has declined. "There will always be people who want big houses, but we're not seeing the grossness we'd been seeing," he said. "People are thinking twice about why they need all that space."

There are many reasons the appeal of bigger houses may be waning, including the high cost of maintaining them. "In a city where \$1,000-a-month air-conditioning bills are not uncommon," said Ms. Horsey of Dallas, "people are beginning to say, 'Maybe I can have less space, and spend the money on a trip to Europe.'" Increasing fuel prices are likely to make large houses even less appealing, Mr. Ahluwalia and others said.

Rising interest rates and land prices also make large houses harder to afford. And an aging population increasingly includes empty-nesters who are looking to downsize, said Ms. Taylor, the designer of Ms. Kennedy's house in Cheshire.

Then there is the cost of furnishing the houses in a style appropriate to their dimensions. Robert A. M. Stern, the dean of the Yale School of Architecture, said he believes many McMansions are actually empty nests. "You walk in the door, and there's not a stick of furniture - certainly not furniture large enough to justify the spaces," he said.

But it may also be that Americans have simply attained all the space they need. The home builders' association, in its polls, asks consumers how big a house they would like to have. The average response in the 2004 poll was 2,426 square feet - barely bigger than the average house built this year. Mr. Ahluwalia, who has worked for the association for 29 years, said the gap between how big houses are - and how big people would like them to be - has never been so slight.

Mr. Stern, himself the designer of many large houses, agreed. "I think we've reached a size that satisfies most people's ambitions," he said.

George Suyama, a Seattle architect, has designed more than 100 houses in the Pacific Northwest. During the 1990's - the peak years of the dot-com boom - he was designing houses so large that he declines to give their dimensions. But now, he says, the houses he is being asked to design are far more modest.

"At least in Seattle, the people who can afford to do really huge houses have already done them," Mr. Suyama said.

Mr. Warren, the planning consultant on Long Island, said that several clients had "built large homes, and after they were finished they decided they were too big and they sold them to move to smaller houses."

Ron Jones, the owner of Sierra Custom Builders in Placitas, N.M., near Albuquerque said, "There's been a shift in the culture: More and more, people are realizing that it's not just the square footage. They're thinking more about issues like durability, and they're open to the idea of flexible spaces."

The public perception of big houses may help explain the shift. Owners of oversized homes are routinely portrayed as architectural yahoos whose "plywood palazzos" leave neighboring buildings in shadow. Some also associate the big houses with greed. In the corporate scandals of recent years, "a persistent motif was the grotesquely large houses of the perpetrators," said James Gauer, author of "The New American Dream: Living Well in Small Homes" (Monacelli, 2004).

At a recent zoning board meeting in New Canaan, Conn., speaker after speaker described new megahouses as intrusive. Residents demanded measures to reduce the so-called loom factor, or the degree to which new houses overpower their neighbors.

In less populous areas, builders of large houses are derided for despoiling the natural environment. Arthur Spiegel, who is retired from the import-export business, is building a 10,000-square-foot house in Lake Placid, N.Y., in the Adirondacks. The hilltop house has brought protests from the Residents' Committee to Protect the Adirondacks, and construction has been halted by local building authorities.

Mr. Spiegel said that the house "is only 6,500 square feet, unless you count the basement," and that it's the right size for his extended family to gather in for ski vacations.

It may also be that, in the way skirts get shorter and ties narrower, housing styles change. For decades, houses with historical details - often rendered in a kind of fake stucco - have been in fashion. Ornaments reminiscent of Versailles or Buckingham Palace require extensive facades.

But those looks appear to be losing some ground to a style that harks back only to the mid-20th century, with flat roofs, generous overhangs and large glass walls.

Modernist houses stress connections between indoors and outdoors. Well-designed terraces, architects say, expand livable space, without requiring heating or air-conditioning.

While magazines like Architectural Digest regularly feature chateau-sized houses, upstarts like Dwell show modernist homes as small as 1,200 square feet.

Many architects are happy to see the tide turn away from big houses. Ms. Taylor of New Haven began her career 25 years ago designing 600-square-foot houses in Seaside, Fla. But in the 80's and 90's, she said, it became harder and harder to find people who wanted smaller houses, and her projects crept up as high as 11,000 square feet.

"I worked on houses, especially for developers, where you just had to fill the space because it was there," Ms. Taylor said. "It just seemed ridiculous. You just keep wondering what people are going to do with all those rooms."

Mr. Ahluwalia of the home builders' association can't hide his relief that houses aren't continuing their rapid increase in size. He called the new statistics "a ray of hope."

But aren't members of his association hoping houses will keep getting bigger? "If the consumer doesn't buy it, the builder is stuck with it," he said. His job, he said, is to tell builders what people want in a new home.

Added Mr. Howard, the association's chief executive, "What builders build is entirely market-driven. And the market appears to be changing."

