

Seeking human scale in the era of humongous houses

LAWRENCE W. CHEEK

The house took seven years to build, sprawled 25,000 square feet across a mountainside and tortured the architect who designed it with moral conflict. It was beautiful, and it slipped into its site with remarkable grace, but it was still a monster – visible for miles, a broadcast of the owner's wealth and importance.

Its architect, a friend, shared his private misgivings with me and gave me a tour just before it was finished. (I felt perverse delight, tracking mud into a zillionaire's house.) It was an awesome building in every sense of the word – the complexity of spaces and geometry, the luxurious materials, the views, the sheerchutzpah of a museum-sized enclosure for a single family's life. It was on that last point that my awe reconfigured into discomfort: I couldn't imagine how anyone's life could be monumental enough to fill that house.

I liked the servants' quarters very much. They exuded permanence, solidity and quality with a scaled-down echo of the big house's spatial drama – all qualities that architects and builders could, but seldom do, invest in modest-sized, middle-class houses. (My offer to buy, sad to say, was refused.)

This is the extreme end of the contemporary American mansion mania, but I can visit spec-built extremes in a 10-minute drive in any direction from my house on the Sammamish Plateau – homes of 3,000 to 4,500 square feet, rapidly edging toward the million-dollar benchmark. Just 10 years ago, that kind of money would have bought serious haciendas, but these are just high-zoot tract homes, dressed to impress. At which they fail spectacularly.

For all their purported luxury, these start-

MONSTER: Scaling down the home

FROM E1

er castles are disasters of design: careless siting, awkward proportioning, poor detailing, dumb space utilization, predictable colors and finishes and smarmy allusions to historic styles. In every house the most interesting space is the one in which its eventual owners will spend the least time: the foyer, always a sweeping two-story expanse lit by a lavish clerestory window and glittering chandelier. Builders design those houses for first impressions, not livability. And that first impression has to be one of grandeur.

Despite breathtaking inflation in property values, U.S. homebuilders and buyers remain on a growth-hormone binge. In 1950, the average new U.S. house was 1,100 square feet; in 1975, 1,645; in 1990, 2,080; in 2004, 2,349. Garages have bloated alongside them. A few years ago, a Tucson developer made national news by marketing six-car, 1,400-square-foot garage options to tack on to three-bedroom, 2,000-square-foot houses.

In neighborhoods cursed with the misfortune of prime location, buyers are 'dozing cottages and wedging in

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palaces that hog the views and lay shadows over their neighbors. Last year, 368 Seattle houses were razed to make way for bigger ones, or apartment or condo buildings. The trend echoes our general indifference to large-scale environmental issues. If the sociobiologists have it right, we're shaped by evolution to value only the welfare of our immediate kin and clan — which in this highly transient society doesn't include our neighborhood and city. We're innately selfish, and more than ever, our houses are showing it.

In statistical abstract, the American dream of home ownership looks healthy. Sixty-nine percent of U.S. families own their dwellings, up from 63 percent in 1965. But home ownership is increasingly a burden, not a joy. We are spending more money to cover

ment and permanence the word implies. We see it as one more consumer purchase — a big one, but otherwise little different from a new computer or cell phone. And we've become conditioned to buy those devices not on the basis of intrinsic quality — that's hard to judge, and the damn thing will be obsolete long before it wears out — but on its panoply of features. Which is increasingly how we buy homes.

On a recent weekend of starter-castle prowling on the plateau, I made a point of eavesdropping on prospective buyers (all of whom, I noted with annoyance, were much younger and much more affluent than I). They gushed over features such as a gas fireplace in the master suite and a play nook in a kid's bedroom. No one seemed to question the obvious carelessness and waste in the designs: a big, west-facing window with skimpy eaves that would turn the master bedroom into a solar broiler on summer evenings or the vestigial formal living and dining rooms, which they seldom, if ever, would use. "It's true, nobody lives that way any more," an on-site broker told me.

How about slashing those rooms from the plan and investing the savings in, say, a covered redwood deck that would serve as an outdoor living space? Because that would be an "innovation" — a word that builders and bankers dread more than earthquakes. As one builder told me, "The saying in our industry is, 'Pioneers have arrows in their backs.'"

What's wrong with big, dumb and grandiose? We're talking private property here, not public architecture financed with tax money. Shouldn't everybody be able to build whatever they can afford?

Sure — on an uncrowded planet with unlimited natural resources. In real American cities and suburbs, space for luxurious stretching-out has almost vanished, unless we encroach on less fortunate people and species. Even the hard-core sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson now says the salvation of our environment depends on one thing — the human capacity, unique in the animal world, for moral reasoning.

At the intimate level of a single house, a family's life can be profoundly enhanced by the design of a home that favors quality over quantity. Several years ago, architect Sarah Susanka burst into prominence with a contrarian book, "The Not So Big House," that explained how to create beautiful spaces without

Why does size matter? It's easy to draw historical parallels: big continent, big ideas - ergo, big SUVs and big houses (our Manifest Destiny!). Logical, but glib. There are more complicated reasons.

One is what I call "personal sprawl." At 2,200 square feet, my current home is twice the size of the house I grew up in, which is statistically typical. A quick inventory reveals that this house encloses a mountain of stuff, much of it de rigueur in a modern middle-class household, that either didn't exist in my parents' generation or never would have occurred to them to buy: computers, printers, fax, home theater, exercise gadget, microwave, food processor, coffee mill. Our four sea kayaks (for a family of two) correspond rather bulkily to my father's lone recreational indulgence, a bag of golf clubs. My home office has to swallow a library of files and books; my father segregated his work at an office that his employer provided for him.

The kayak fleet is admittedly indulgent, but it also represents something deeper than scattergun acquisition. My generation is vastly more receptive to new experiences than my parents'. As Gail Sheehy observed in "New Passages," "More and more people are finding ways to avoid the restrictive identity that used to define middle age." This may require stuff and the space to stash it.

Why not declare other values to be more important - expressive design, quality materials, efficiency, sustainability? The answer again lies in the difference between my parents' generation and mine. They viewed the purchase of a house as the creation of a home, with all the emotional attach-

Susanka advocates summing
houses through a repertoire of creative strategies. Varied ceiling heights help articulate rooms and add spatial drama. Built-in bookcases or even kitchens are shoehorned into normally wasted space, such as the lee of a stairway. Pocket doors give back the 5 square feet that a 30-inch door needs to swing open 90 degrees. Add up enough of these tricks and a house shrinks by a third.

"We're trying to fill some hole in our lives," Susanka once told me, "and when a little doesn't do it, we buy more and more - more stuff, more square footage."

But sheer acquisition can't express who we are as individuals (if it does, it means we're just vacuous gluttons). What Susanka advocates is nothing less than a rethinking of how we live: an affirmation that domestic architecture should nurture the human spirit and respect the land.

American houses, Thoreau wrote in one of "Walden's" crankier passages, "are so vast and magnificent" that their inhabitants "seem to be only vermin which infest them." (This was in 1854!) I think back to that mansion my architect friend designed and picture myself infesting. I need to simplify, not complicate, my life, which is why I would gravitate to the servants' quarters. They offered a humane scale and a modest bite of the expressive design and quality of the main house, minus its attitude.

And attitude ought to be the first consideration in our houses, because they express directly how we feel not only about ourselves but also our communities and the Earth's environment. Nothing we build is more personal, or more important.