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THE MAGAZINE OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HOME BUILDERS

NOVEMBER 2006

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Part One Of A Two-Part Series

Tight Squeeze

As lot sizes get smaller and smaller, builders are coming up with inventive ways to build homes that offer quality over quantity.

By: [Kathleen Stanley](#)



PERFECT FIT: At Oceana, a 95-unit neighborhood built by John Laing Homes in Hercules, Calif., the narrow lots actually work to each elevation's advantage. The homes, designed by architects from the KTG Group, are all three stories high, which can sometimes read as tall and skinny. Having them just 6 feet apart from each other helps downplay their vertical appearance.

Credit: Eric Figge

It's a curious thing. At the same time that houses are getting bigger and bigger, lot sizes keep on getting smaller and smaller. Just look at the numbers: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average size of new homes increased from 2,095 square feet in 1992 to 2,434 square feet in 2005. Average lot sizes during that same period decreased from 18,722 square feet to 17,567 square feet.

Anyone who's seen an infill house go up in an established neighborhood can vouch for this phenomenon. Where there was once a modest ranch or colonial-style dwelling surrounded by a nice-sized yard, now stands a mega house that fills out its lot to the max. Jurisdictions are scrambling to get a handle on these monsters, experimenting with restrictive floor-area ratios (FARs) and other measures to help put on the brakes. For new projects, more and more municipalities are asking for neighborhoods with higher densities, whether that's TNDs, transit-oriented developments (TODs), or mixed-use projects. Sick of grinding treks to work, home buyers are opting to live in communities that embrace the notion of sidewalks and shorter commutes as well as amenities within walking distance, even though that often means less square footage.

The good news is that the building industry is responding with innovative designs, smart site plans, and the realization that there's a market out there

for smaller homes. Bigger is not always better.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Jim Soules, co-owner of The Cottage Co. in Seattle, has a lot to say on the topic of building small. That's no surprise given the recognition that his charming pocket-lot neighborhoods, designed by Langley, Wash.-based architect Ross Chapin, have garnered in recent years. He's a real cheerleader for architect Sarah Susanka's not-so-big home movement and thinks the whole notion of "small" deserves some new talking points.

"We need a language that's more like clothing sizes," says Soules, on the phone from the porch of a 1,080-square-foot home that's under construction at Phase 2 of Conover Commons, the Redmond, Wash., successor to one of his company's earlier—and highly successful—cottage projects. For him, that would be something like this: XS (<700 square feet), S (700 to 1,200 square feet), M (1,201 to 1,900 square feet), L (1,901 to 2,500 square feet), XL (2,501 to 3,200 square feet), XXL (>3,200 square feet). "We also need to demonstrate the flexible house, a house designed with an attached or detached accessory dwelling unit that can be used as a home office, for grown kids or an elderly parent, or a rental unit for a single."

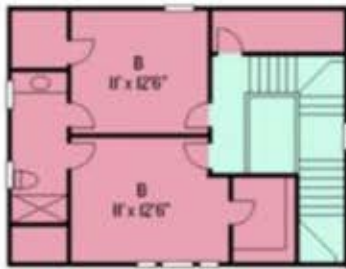
For builder Steve Kendrick, president of Structures Building Co. in Mount Pleasant, S.C., accessory units have paid off big time, especially with many of the houses he's built at l'On Village, a Mount Pleasant TND. Take the 1,400-square-foot house on North Shelmore that he put up for one of his employees on a 37-by-109-foot lot. The main house has just two bedrooms, but a third bedroom—or office or exercise room or in-law suite—tops the detached garage out back. "A two-bedroom house used to be unheard of, but we've found that if someone needs a third bedroom, it's often not for a child but for visitors," says Kendrick. "In that case we'll do a room over the detached garage. This works especially well for the aging baby-boom population. A lot of our houses are second homes or retirement spots for people who are downsizing."

Dividing the living space between two buildings also helps diminish the almost unavoidable shotgun nature of houses that get built on not-so-wide lots. "Obviously, a home built on a small lot is going to be narrow and longer, which means that daylight can be an issue," says Kendrick. His company makes every effort to strategically locate windows and doors so that spaces don't feel so small. That means having windows on multiple walls, especially in the rooms at the front of the house, and including something—a door, a window, some trim—that draws the eye to the back of the house.

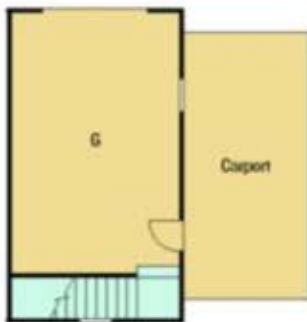
Kendrick also believes that adding interior interest goes a long way toward mitigating that tight-squeeze feeling. "If you're going to go small, you certainly have to put money in some of the detailing," he says. Kendrick has had success running painted, exterior-grade, 1-by-6 shiplap siding on, say, two walls in a living room. It's economical and goes a long way toward breaking up those mundane expanses of drywall.

SITE IT RIGHT

R. John Anderson, vice president of planning and design at New Urban Builders in Chico, Calif., is also intent on offering buyers more than what he calls "puffed-up empty drywall space." But he thinks building small needs to begin long before the design process (and drywall installers) start. "The approach we take is to think of the street, something we have to build anyway with our projects, as an amenity," says Anderson. Forget the usual 42-foot-wide, roll-curb, no-sidewalk street, lit with giant cobra-head lights that shine directly into upstairs bedrooms (or disrupt the tree canopy), he says. Instead, plan for the street to be 26 feet wide with parking on one side, which will slow down traffic, and include sidewalks and attractive 10- or 12-foot lights. And while you're at it, says Anderson, put the garage, the gang mailbox, and that ugly transformer around back. Make the front of the house inviting,



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and buyers are likely to think charm instead of small.

Narrow, deep lots

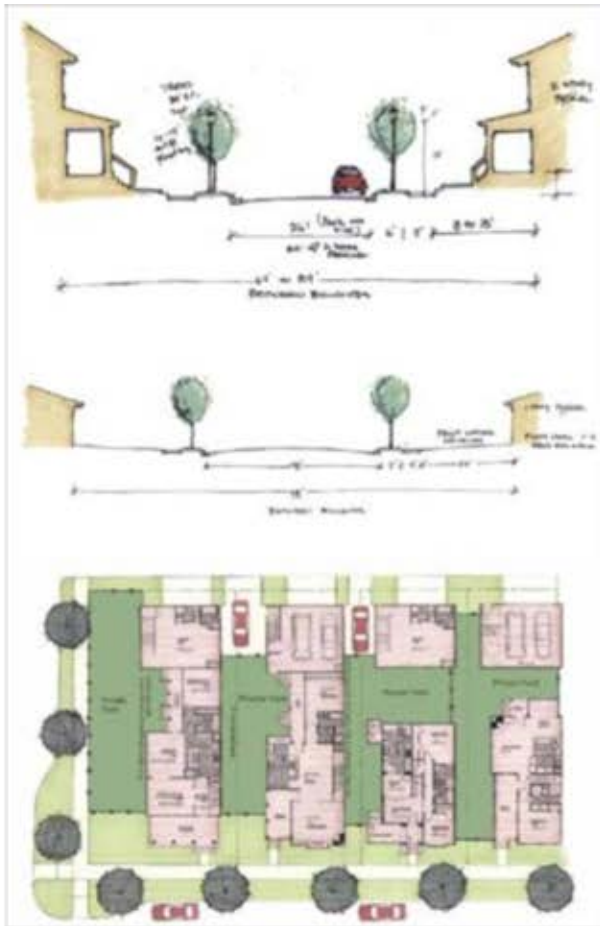
SMART PLANNING: Taking full advantage of its 37-by-109-foot lot, Structures Building Co. designed the back of this 1,400-square-foot house in Mount Pleasant, S.C., as a connector between the cottage-style front elevation and a separate two-story garage at the back of the lot.

Credit: Matthew Scott

(typically 35-by-100 feet), such as those at Doe Mill Neighborhood, New Urban Builders' popular TND in Chico, could have meant almost useless strips of yard for each home. Instead, the builder consolidated the two side yards so that a coherent courtyard could be put together. A 5-foot side-yard easement offers the benefits of a zero-lot-line configuration but allows penetrations and windows on what Anderson calls the "passive" side of the house (see "Street Smarts," page 148). The sills are placed 6 feet above the floor to preserve the privacy of the neighboring yard.

Green space, window placement, and side-yard configurations were a top consideration at another high-density California project, this time in the red-hot city of Hercules, just north of Oakland. Back in 2000, the city of Hercules started rewriting its zoning ordinances to make the best use of its urban core, which had once been home to light industry. "They got it right," says Jill Williams, a principal at the Irvine, Calif.-based architecture firm KTG Y Group.

KTGY's site plan for Bayside, which recently won a Builder's Choice award, worked within Hercules' guidelines to create a perimeter road so that all the homes face out and everyone can partake of the available open space. But care was also taken to ensure that each house had its own green space.



The smallest lots—27 feet wide by 55 feet deep—are at Oceana, a 95-home Bayside neighborhood built by John Laing Homes. Here, instead of each house having a 3- or 4-foot-wide side yard, KTG employed private-use easements. “Each house is plotted down the middle of the lot, but on one side of the house they’re going to give the use of their side yard to their neighbor, but, in turn, they’ll get their [other] neighbor’s side yard,” Williams explains. “This way, you can really start to utilize that space and create private patios. The homes ‘zero’ to that side.” Everything is pre-plotted, so a quick CAD run can verify that the side windows are aligned correctly for privacy.



At

Credit: Douglas Keister

Oceana, the narrow lots actually worked to each elevation’s advantage. “Oceana is somewhat unique in that they are three-story homes, which tend to get a little vertical,” says Williams. “From a massing standpoint, having them 6 feet apart played into the feeling we were going for, which was based on the kinds of historic Italianate and Victorian homes you see in San Francisco.”

MULTIFAMILY CUES

When it comes to putting up houses on small parcels of land, single-family builders would do well to study some good multifamily townhome projects. That’s what architects and planners at Bloodgood Sharp Buster (BSB), a national design firm based in Des Moines, Iowa, have been doing. They’ve even got a trademarked name for one of their multifamily-inspired plans: the “Pull-a-Part” (see “Multifamily Inspiration,” page 152).

These 900- to 1,700-square-foot, detached homes with garages and yards can be built in eight- or 10-pack cluster configurations that yield 15 to 17 units per acre. Any number of variations, with complementary exterior themes, are possible, including single- and two-story plans (with one-car garages); three stories (with two-car garages); and paseos that provide access to the front of some of the homes as well as meandering walkways that can link to other on-site amenities.

“A lot of our [builder] clients were finding parcels of land that were good for multifamily products, but they were running into insurance problems,” says Karen West, a BSB partner who’s in charge of the firm’s Western regional offices in El Dorado Hills, Calif. “That, combined with the fact that a lot of jurisdictions were looking for denser, more walkable communities, made us think about the idea of



STREET SMARTS: For New Urban Builders, how homes relate to the street and to each other are hallmarks of its Doe Mill Neighborhood in Chico, Calif. The sketches above show the street design New Urban uses (top) and a more typical suburban street (middle). The plan illustrates the 5-foot side-yard easement that forms a coherent yard for two houses. Lots of detail and varied elevations help add to the neighborhood mix.

Credit: New Urban Builders

taking a townhome product, pulling it apart, and using the least amount of setback space available.”

Builders also like the fact that most Pull-a-Parts don't require any fire rating, which can save a considerable amount of money—and time. “It's a concept that lends itself to the benefits of owning a single-family detached home with some of the lifestyle elements that you would find in an attached product,” says West.

Even a pure attached product can offer some inspiration for single-family builders looking to get the most from a scarce amount of land. Fremont Lofts, an eight-unit townhome project on a quarter-acre lot in Seattle, is modeled after the Dutch concept of *woonerf*, which means “living street.” A winding driveway makes its way up the site's steep hill, bisecting the project in two.



LIGHT-MINDED: Strategic window placement and plenty of light are especially important for houses built on small lots. At Danielson Grove, a Kirkland, Wash., pocket-lot neighborhood from The Cottage Co., homes are sited to give maximum privacy, and skylights are used to bring in extra light.

Credit: The Cottage Co.

“Because of the topography and the way the driveway needed to go diagonally across the site, it was useful for us to twist the units a little bit,” says Ray Johnston of Johnston Architects in Seattle. “That opened up some view corridors, made each building look much broader and less tall from the street, and provided a gathering spot for people. In that particular zone, the expected formula would be an apartment block, but by blowing that up with duplexes and a drive lane in the middle, it adds more character and quality.”

In other words, building small with tight parameters—whether it's a long skinny lot, a tricky infill site, or a project that calls for a dense collection of single-family homes—is full of possibilities. “What's available now is more and more difficult sites, especially in cities,” says Johnston. “The result is unique projects that diverge from the easy formula, which is always an improvement.”

Kathleen Stanley is a freelance writer based in Washington.

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