

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Thinking small can be a big challenge for homebuyers

By Bob Karlovits

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sunday, August 28, 2011

When architect and designer Jim Cardillo looks at the Cape Cod-dominated small homes that dominated construction after World War II, he sees houses he thinks should be popular today.

"Small homes are for people who have been around the block," he says, believing many would-be buyers simply have not strolled through life enough to discover that truth.

It leads to the paradox with small homes: In a time where downsizing and energy efficiency are popular, the small home has limited popularity.

Maryann Bacharach from the Shadyside office of Howard Hanna Real Estate, sees a market for them and insists the "boomers are looking for small ranches."

Yet, she admits one of the first comments many clients have is: "Let's see, what am I going to have to add to this place."

Architect Bob Barrage, who is taking over the practice of Thomas Wasilowski in Natrona Heights, says the design of an efficient small home always is a challenge, but one he does not get enough because of a lack of interest.

"Americans are obsessed with the idea that bigger is better," he says.

The National Association of Home Builders reports that in 2010 only 13 percent of new homes were in its small category, under 1,400 square feet. By comparison, the 1,800- to 2,399-square-foot category alone was more than twice that size -- 27 percent. Even the 3,000- to 3,999-square-foot range was larger: 15 percent.

But architect Gerald Lee Morosco lives in a 1,200-square-foot home in the South Side and says it proves one thing.

"It says you can have everything you can need," he says.

BAD ATTITUDE?

Some real estate brokers and designers see a "buy 'em, don't build 'em"

attitude toward small homes.

Tom Yargo, manager of the Coldwell Banker Real Estate office in Shadyside, and Monique Thorniley, from the Greensburg Howard Hanna office, sees great interest in smaller homes from empty-nesters who are downsizing.

Yargo, for instance, says Morningside is popular because its small units are on equally diminutive lots that are level and require little maintenance.

Thorniley says she recently listed a two-bedroom ranch in Hempfield that sold in less than a month the last time it was on the market.

"It's like a carriage home without the fees and restrictions," she says.

In that sense, and contrary to the home builders report, the Washington-based American Institute of Architects says its annual home design trend report points out 57 percent of its members reported home sizes to be declining. Only 3 percent saw home sizes as increasing.

The reality would seem to be between the two sets of numbers.

Morosco, for instance, says he does a great deal of work in small homes. Often, he says, that is because of his known involvement in such projects.

The design of the house is in the mindset of the owner, Morosco says. It is a mindset that sometimes leads to growth.

Cardillo says he often is called to expand on the ranch homes and Cape Cods that would seem to be perfect for downsizing homes.

He has his business headquartered in Mercer County now, but still works much in Allegheny County's northern suburbs, where he once had an office in Marshall.

He believes many empty-nesters do not have a grasp of downsizing. They find a need to "grow" a smaller home to fit their needs for a home office and home theater space while maintaining spaces such as the formal dining room, that are seldom used.

"The lifestyles have changed," he says. "Look at those Cape Cods. They most often have one-car garages. Now, everybody wants a two-car. Or a three."

APPEALING TO DOWNSIZERS

Those changing lifestyles can lead to search for even a bigger "small" home.

Ernie Sota, president of Bellevue-based Sota Construction says interest in plans such as the South Side's Riverside Mews shows some buyers are looking

for smaller homes.

Those homes are a little larger than those in the 1,400- to 1,500-square-foot range, but Sota says many of the interested parties are "coming in from suburban lots" for smaller living.

There will be 47 homes in that development, ranging from \$440,000 to \$720,000.

Often, though, the idea to construct a smaller home gets waylaid. Barrage and others see fear in the cost-per-square-foot issue as prompting expansion.

Because the cost of kitchens and baths jack up prices so much, many buyers fear they will hurt resale value. Adding some size elsewhere can make a house seem more reasonable, he says.

They suggest that is why more smaller homes are not built -- or why plans for them expand.

Yet, the market is out there and needs to be explored further, says Debbie Novickoff from Howard Hanna's Murrysville office. She says WDL Builders from that community is working on 21 small homes in Unity in Westmoreland County. They will be 1,500 square feet with an optional second floor and sell for less than \$200,000.

The concept is to appeal to the downsizer who does not want to move into an apartment or a carriage-home development.

"A lot of people don't want a party wall," she says of a common aspect to carriage homes. "This will give them their own space."

Bob Karlovits can be reached at bkarlovits@tribweb.com or 412-320-7852.

Images and text copyright © 2011 by Trib Total Media, Inc.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent.