

# The Shrinking Lot

*As lots tighten their girth, builders and architects are scrutinizing ways to make the houses on them live large.*

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**By Cheryl Weber**

In their former lives, builders hired an engineer to carve standardized lots out of parcels of land, and then an architect designed the houses that sat on them. But in many pockets of the market today, that approach is obsolete. Dwindling land supplies and the high cost of land close to urban areas mean that builders are doing away with planning and design inefficiencies. As lot sizes shrink to remain affordable for buyers, builders and architects are designing lots and houses simultaneously. They're creating communities where slenderized plots with notches, shared green space, and other non-traditional shapes fit together like pieces of a puzzle. And the houses that occupy them are oriented and detailed just so.

Small-lot configurations have been around for many years, but today builders are using them more often. The challenge is not so much finding buyers who are willing to live on less land; plenty of people like the low-maintenance lifestyle it offers or are happy to sacrifice lot size for location. Rather, it's manipulating space to create new products that appeal to buyers, the neighbors, and the jurisdictions. "Our goal as architects is to make people not realize the lot has shrunk by carefully planning the house so the outdoor space is seamless," says architect Michael Woodley, of Woodley Architectural Group in Denver.

## **Outside the box**

For architect Bill Kreager at Mithun in Seattle, a strong community concept is key to the success of small-lot products, so the site planning and architectural design must support each other. "Civil engineers don't understand the architecture of what you have to do," he says. "When they max out the number of lots, they cram them in without understanding the concept, or the importance of what the character of the total community will be. When you do architecture and site planning together, you can work the footprints to maximize the charm of your neighborhood."

When lots get smaller, they typically get skinnier. On plots in the 4,500-square-foot range, alley-loaded two-car garages free up side yards and set up the opportunity to pair outdoor living spaces with rooms on the rear or the side of the house. Use easements, the domino effect that allows the houses on a street to be placed in the middle of the lot and borrow a neighbor's side yard, also maximize usable space. Kreager prefers that solution to the zero lot line because it eliminates the need for a fire-rated wall without windows. Often you can't have eaves that project over a fire-rated wall, or skylights within several

feet of it, he points out, so you lose light and architectural interest. "A gain of 5 feet over the depth of the lot is a lot of space," Kreager adds. "You can plant it or put in a patio, and open up the house with windows all the way around to make the site feel and live big. We've returned to use easements in the last decade, and the way we're doing it is new and fresh."

Communities with plots smaller than 3,000 square feet require more intricate planning and reduced setbacks. Woodley is helping builders in Denver and Las Vegas hit a \$200,000 price point by designing homes on lots 37 feet wide by 60 feet long. They're notched and zippered together in such a way that the owners get some private space, even though the setback doesn't run all the way across the rear of the property. "Focusing windows on the outdoor space you've created gives the feeling of a traditional lot," he says. "It's site planning on a micro scale."

Mithun is perfecting what it calls cottage communities, one- and two-story dwellings on lots as tiny as 2,000 square feet. The houses have a one-car garage set back 18 feet from the street to create a second parking place, 10-foot front and rear yards, and 3-foot side yards, but each lot adjoins a common open space. Mithun architect Dick Bruskrud points out that standard zoning would have added 50 percent to each lot's size. "In this case, by reducing these yards and opening them up to a common green, we're able to get almost one and a half times as many houses on the site," he says. Mithun also economizes on costs and environmental waste by designing the homes in even dimensions, usually multiples of four, to accept standard materials.

Careful massing and four-sided architecture--detailing every wall--help houses adapt to their shrunken stage sets. Despite the small footprint, architect Rick Emsiek, of McLarand Vasquez Emsiek & Partners in Irvine, Calif., resists the temptation to build out the entire envelope. To create interest on homes for Summerhill Builders in Palo Alto, Calif., that face a paseo, he designed a second-floor porch that runs the 22-foot width of the house. It serves as a balcony and creates a protective entry for the first floor. Stepping back the third floor by 6 feet further softens the elevation and keeps the third-floor area below 500 square feet, which defines the house as a two-story in terms of building codes.

Astoria Homes in Las Vegas is achieving densities of 14 units per acre with 1,000- to 1,300-square-foot homes that include a single-car garage, up to three bedrooms, a 7-foot-by-13-foot front courtyard, and a common area. "When you put houses this close together, they really need to look different," says Tracy Lee, vice president of design. Its current communities of 400 to 500 homes include five plans with three stucco elevation choices apiece and 300 different color schemes. "We have a colorist doing our colors--four per house--so you hardly ever see the same colors repeated," she says. "It makes a huge difference."

### **Interior monologue**

The common denominator for successful small-lot products is that they can't feel small. One way to get that spacious feel is with the great-room concept--open kitchen, dining,

and living spaces that work together extremely well. In its upscale entry-level homes, Astoria turns the attention to oversized kitchens, about 12 feet by 12 feet with an island and bar overlooking the family room. At Woodley Architectural Group, large foyers go out the door in favor of defined entryways, preferably with cross-views focused on a courtyard or other designed outdoor area.

Taylor Woodrow, another firm working within the constraints of small lots, creates the illusion of space with two-story volumes and by using structural steel--something you wouldn't ordinarily see on a small-lot house--to create longer spans that allow for more windows. And the builder is still providing formal spaces, though they've become more compact. "Everyone says you have to get rid of formal spaces, but we still find that the plans that have those are the most popular," says Mike Forsum, California division president, in Irvine, Calif. "People have a trophy piece of furniture, or want a place to set the Christmas tree, or they want an area off the main gathering space to read or have a conversation. In an 1,800- to 2,200-square-foot house on a 3,000-square-foot lot, we can still provide that space and get some value for it."

On lots that are less than 4,000 square feet, it's difficult to get a master bedroom on the house's main level. The Lessard Architectural Group, based in McLean, Va., is putting it on the second floor where there's more square footage to play with over the garage. To provide the spacious master suites buyers want, a secondary bedroom often migrates to the attic. "We've gone to three-story houses, but generally the market isn't ready for it yet," says architect Chris Lessard. "Instead, we're doing funky rooms or bonus spaces in attics: bedrooms, studies, or exercise rooms."

### **Thinking small**

Lessard has designed \$750,000 courtyard homes without a backyard, not just in California but in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington. And buyers aren't blinking. "The reality is that buyers do want compact lots," he says. "Today's families are organized to the hilt; kids don't do pickup games in their backyards anymore because they're involved in organized sports. The consumer says, yes, it is dense, but I'm getting the close-in location I want. Housing markets that have done well in recessions are the ones that offer local services. Also, families are becoming a minority in the marketplace."

Marianne Browne, vice president of sales and marketing for John Laing Homes, based in Newport Beach, Calif., observes the same acceptance among consumers. A dense single-family, detached site plan attracts diverse buyers--empty-nesters looking for lower maintenance; starter families, even some with teens; singles; and single-parent households. Taylor Woodrow's clientele includes a heavily immigrant population that doesn't view Lilliputian lots as a trade-off at all. They're much more interested in communities with an urban feel and access to the bus line and the local bakery. "The backyard today is for adults," Forsum says. "All the action is on the streets."

Even so, merchandising is a huge part of the formula for success. Astoria is now working on its fifth and sixth neighborhoods of houses on lots as compact as 1,500 square feet. To

differentiate itself from other local builders, it offers what it calls the 100 percent home, which includes all appliances, window coverings, and landscaping.

John Laing Homes holds seminars showing buyers how to landscape and accessorize their postage-stamp backyards. "We'll show four lifestyle ideas hitting the psychographics of our market, from play equipment to herb gardening to hot tubs," says Browne. "Often families need two outdoor zones, a retreat for the parents and a play area for the kids." The builder also plans events that bring people together, such as concerts in pocket parks and neighborhood barbecues to welcome every new buyer. "The beauty of the program is that it really creates a sense of community," Browne says, "reminiscent of years ago when people talked to their neighbors."

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## **The Shrinking Lot: Projects**

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**By Cheryl Weber**

### **Project 1**

#### **Potter's Bend Ladera Ranch, Calif.**

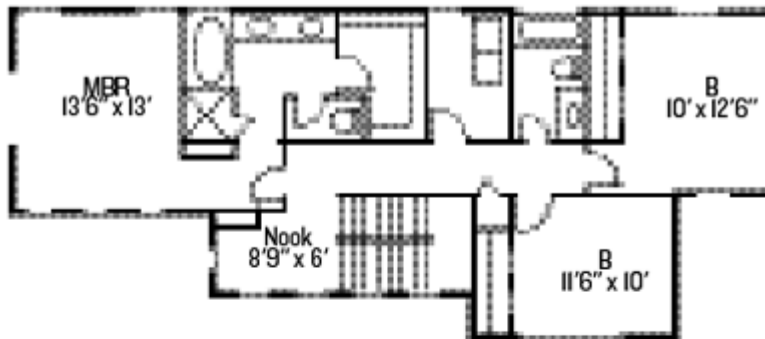
Detached cluster houses allowed John Laing Homes to achieve densities of 12 per acre at Potter's Bend. Architect Michael Woodley designed a six-pack of two homes facing the street, two behind them gazing toward each other across a shared roadway, and two in the back that face forward. "We found that our buyers interpret it as living at the end of a cul-de-sac," says Marianne Browne, vice president of sales and marketing for John Laing Homes. "We still provide yards and green space in front, but it's common area."

The lots on the streets read as traditional in size, with the pocket lots tucked behind. Inside, this house's foyer is defined but modestly scaled. The floor plan swings around a central stairwell, where the house opens to a spacious great room and views of the garden. Upstairs, two bedrooms and a bath are stacked over the garage, allowing room for a spacious master suite and an office nook on the rest of the second floor.

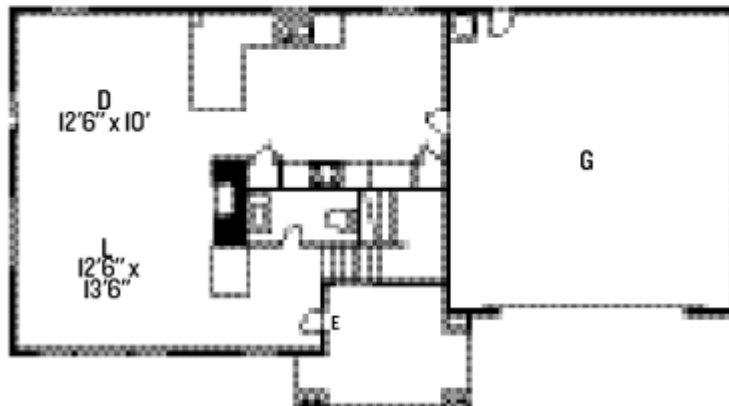
This larger home in the cluster features a linear plan attached to the garage, compared with the box plans of the homes behind it that wrap around the garage. "It's a completely different feel, yet all the houses have access to private space," Woodley says. "It fits together like a puzzle."

**Project:** Potter's Bend, Ladera Ranch, Calif.; **Lot sizes:** Cluster of six lots averaging 2,800 square feet (the lot size of the house shown is 70 feet wide by 35 feet deep); **House sizes:** 1,225 to 1,825 square feet (the house shown is 1,636 square feet);

**Builder/developer:** John Laing Homes, Newport Beach, Calif.; **Architect:** Woodley Architectural Group, Denver



SECOND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

Photo: BUILDER magazine

Lot size: 70' x 35'

## Project 2

### Chelsea Estates Temecula, Calif.

In this upscale market, the strategy was to put a lot of house on a small lot, or, as architect Michael Woodley puts it, "the big house on the not-so-big lot." Although all of the lots in this community were plotted at 45 feet wide, the builder narrowed some of them and made others wider to achieve a lower sales price per square foot. This house is stacked high and fills the entire envelope, but in a way that doesn't kill the facade. The two-and-a-

half-story turret creates drama on the elevation while providing a stylish circulation spine that opens the interior from top to bottom. Because the garage is pulled back from the street and is accessed through a side court, its presence is downplayed.

**Project:** Chelsea Estates, Temecula, Calif.; **Lot size:** 4,500 square feet (45 feet wide by 100 feet deep); **House size:** 3,280 square feet; **Builder/developer:** Lennar, Miami; **Architect:** Woodley Architectural Group, Denver

## Project 3

### Silverado Place Las Vegas

Targeted toward young professionals, this entry-level house has room for just the basics--and no backyard. Tracy Lee, vice president of design for Astoria Homes, made the most of the tiny lot by including a landscaped and fenced front courtyard for outdoor living. At 7 feet by 13 feet, the courtyard is just big enough for a patio table and chairs. Well-mannered street elevations feature recessed one-car garages and projections such as balconies and covered entryways that break up the box.

Inside, the kitchen, dining, and living areas read as one large space, and the laundry, tucked into a niche in the garage, consists of stacked units that come with the house. The upper level is big enough for two bedrooms and a multipurpose loft. Astoria offers four different floor plans in this 429-home community ranging from 1,138 square feet to 1,244 square feet, and three elevation choices per plan. Lee says the builder's best-selling model is the largest one, which features a deck off the master suite.

**Project:** Silverado Place, Las Vegas; **Lot size:** 1,530 square feet (34 feet wide by 45 feet deep); **House size:** 1,176 square feet; **Builder/Developer/Architect:** Astoria Homes, Las Vegas

## Project 4

### Harbor Town Memphis, Tenn.

As charming as a child's drawing, the lines of these simple little houses in a master planned TND belie their thoughtful floor plan. The houses live and look larger than they are, thanks to the open gables that shelter abstracted porches in front and back, and a common park off the back alley that extends the living space. "The advantage of these smaller lots is that you can pull from the community amenities of parks and trail systems," notes Looney Ricks Kiss architect Mark Jones. "But it's important that the lots vary in size to appeal to every buyer."

Two-story volumes and crisp, clean interiors were designed to appeal to single professionals. Against the all-white walls, the architects injected visual interest with

exposed tie beams and a jazzy spiral stair. Privacy and flexibility are important elements of these tiny homes. Jones says that on small lots you really have to control window placements. Sill heights on windows facing the neighbor's designated private zone are placed at least 5 1/2 feet off the floor. And the parking is front loaded, but it's an open carport that the owners can walk through or use as a side patio.

Identical in form, the houses rely on their differing colors to create a streetscape. "It's simple construction--balloon framing, a tilt-up wall, and you're set to go," Jones says. "The simplicities of these houses are what make them special."

**Project:** Harbor Town, Memphis, Tenn.; **Average lot size:** 3,000 square feet (30 feet wide by 100 feet deep); **House size:** 1,534 square feet; **Builder/developer:** Ben Reisman, Memphis; **Architect:** Looney Ricks Kiss, Memphis; **Land planner:** RTKL, Baltimore

## Project 5

### North Creek Cottages Bothell, Wash.

With their soft, muted colors and their classic details, these homes are as welcoming as their name suggests. Many of the houses sit a mere 7 feet apart, though the size of the lots varies. They're clustered around two common open spaces and bordered by a wetland. On the three-bedroom-plus-den plan shown below, the architects opened up the first floor to one big great room and tucked the kitchen around behind to give it some separation from the living area. Standing in the entryway, you can look diagonally through the house and see the grassy common beyond.

Mithun created neighborly elevations that emphasize the porch, which is large enough to set a few chairs on. The homes are clad in the contrasting textures of earth-toned cement fiberboard and cedar shingles. The photo shown above is not, however, indicative of all the North Creek Cottages. A stormwater detention vault in the front yard of several houses required a 20-foot setback, whereas the majority of homes in the community sit 5 to 10 feet from the sidewalk.

**Project:** North Creek Cottages, Bothell, Wash.; **Average lot size:** 2,035 square feet (37 feet wide by 55 feet deep); **House size:** 1,584 square feet; **Builder/developer:** CamWest, Kirkland, Wash.; **Architect/Land planner:** Mithun, Seattle