

LIVING LARGE AS OREGON HOMES BALLOON TO AN AVERAGE 2,200 SQUARE FEET, BUYERS ARE SAYING THAT MORE IS MORE

By Laura Oppenheimer

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Houses in the United States have gone the way of french fries, waistlines and sport utility vehicles: They've been supersized.

Oregon is no exception. Homes have expanded even as the lots they sit on have shrunk to fit in sprawl-limiting boundaries.

Professionals with money to burn and children to accommodate have more buying power than ever, and they're spending it on luxuries such as media rooms, hobby space and guest bedrooms. Meanwhile, many families acquire an arsenal of computers, televisions and cars that would be tough to cram into a typical older home.

There are some signs the 50-year trend will be cut down to size: People are beginning to pick more expensive materials over square footage. Baby boomers are paring down. And, especially on Portland's small lots, some home buyers are choosing to save space for gardening and outdoor living.

But large houses most likely will continue to be a big hit among younger suburban buyers, as long as interest rates remain low and people can afford to move up.

"It may not be on a buyer's mind, 'Gee, this lot will only accommodate a 2,000-square-foot house,' " says Brad Hosmar, a Tigard architect. "It's more, 'How much square footage can I get on that?'"

Nationally, the size of the typical new house more than doubled between 1950 and 2000, from 983 square feet to 2,265 square feet, according to the National Association of Homebuilders. In the Portland area, home size increased steadily from about 1,500 square feet in mid-century to 2,200 square feet this decade, Metro data from Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties show.

Demand for homes in high-density neighborhoods such as the Pearl District partially offsets suburban homes' added bulk in Oregon but doesn't squelch the trend. Even in older neighborhoods with modest home sizes, remodeling to add more space is common.

Pat Lautenbach has watched his elbow room expand right along with the average. He grew up in a Washington County farmhouse where he and three brothers roughhoused in a pair of attic bedrooms and waited their turn for one bathroom.

So it's no small departure -- and no small house -- that allowed Pat and his wife, Andrea, to marshal Super Bowl guests last month into two viewing spots: an upstairs media room for serious fans, a downstairs family room for pop-culture mongers. The crowd could have spread out to an office, a baby nursery, a guest bedroom, formal living and dining rooms and the master bedroom, too.

The Lautenbachs moved in August 2003 from a smaller, Colonial-style home to their 2,900-square-foot spread in Washington County's Cedar Mill area. They no longer feel crunched for space, and 1-year-old Jake has plenty of room to play.

Being able to buy such a big house surprised Pat, a minister, and Andrea, an orthodontist. Low interest rates increased their buying power, they say.

"Growing up, this is the type of house I always envisioned having in my 40s or 50s, not when I'm 32," Andrea says. "We feel really blessed."

Buyers: Bigger is better

When real estate agent Andy Doern meets new clients, he starts with an important question: "How big of a house do you want?" Most families tell him they need at least three bedrooms and a place for kids, cars and televisions.

"If you've got a 3,000-square-foot home, you'll fill it and want to move up," says Doern, who works for D'Ambrosio and Associates.

Doern knows.

He and his wife -- parents to a 5-month-old girl -- recently decided to sell their 3,200-square-foot house in Happy Valley. The replacement will weigh in at 4,000 square feet, including another guest room and a basement great room with a wet bar and big-screen TV.

This will be the couple's third house since 2000, each bigger than the last. Extra living space is nice, Doern says, and it's a good investment.

Doern helps buyers find places for home offices and electronic equipment. Because he specializes in new subdivisions, his clients tend to want the rooms and amenities that come standard in 2005.

Architects, too, are taking requests. Hosmar has built everything from his-and-hers dens to a special spot for video game systems.

Most clients at Pollard-Hosmar and Associates want to either increase bedroom size to accommodate computers and televisions or create extra rooms for them, he says. Appliances such as refrigerators and stoves have gotten bigger too, all demanding more space.

Buyers typically have an idea what they want and what they'll spend to get it, Hosmar says.

"It amazes me the number of people who come in, fairly young, with significant buying power," says Hosmar, who has designed custom homes, subdivisions and remodels. "Before, the percentage of income people were willing to commit was lower."

With most women working and couples waiting longer to have children, more money is available for housing. Low interest rates the past few years have fueled the trend.

Consider this: A buyer able to lay down 20 percent up front and make a \$1,200 monthly mortgage payment could afford a \$280,000 house at a 5 percent interest rate over 30 years, compared with a \$205,000 house at an 8 percent rate.

Buyers put a premium on space, real estate professionals say, because it gives them freedom to live and work comfortably. A higher expectation of privacy these days discourages shared bedrooms and encourages customized office or hobby space.

Limits to growth

Though square footage has continued to grow, experts say several factors signal a leveling off in the next decade.

Baby boomers who upsized over the years are reaching retirement age and deciding they don't need 3,000 square feet for two people. Meanwhile, buyers are asking for upscale finishes such as granite countertops and hardwood floors -- amenities that often were sacrificed during the 1980s and 1990s, when size trumped everything else.

The Portland area will be an especially interesting test case of big houses' staying power, builders say, because constraints on land from the urban growth boundary make it harder to keep making houses bigger.

Land-use planning rules have scaled back the size of the typical suburban lot from 10,000 square feet a decade ago. Plopping a heavyweight house on a welterweight lot eliminates most of what would be the back yard.

Shrinking lots -- 5,000 square feet or smaller for a full-size house is not out of the ordinary -- can work both ways.

Maximizing square footage increases the value of a small sliver of land, says John Schleimer, a builders' consultant from California who has advised Oregon companies. Some buyers figure if they can't have lots of grass, at least they'll have space for hobbies, entertaining and downtime, he says.

"Just look at Portland," Schleimer says. "With higher lot and land costs, builders are putting in more square footage to create perceived value."

Hosmar says the yard-house trade-off is setting in on buyers: He hears more complaints about lot size than anything else. Some customers add onto their existing homes to keep a bigger lot, while others rein in square footage but make every inch count.

Followers of architect Sarah Susanka's book "The Not So Big House" say a modest home can be just as enjoyable if it is well-designed.

People often think they need -- and want -- more space than they really do, says Charles Miller, special issues editor for Fine

Homebuilding magazine. The former remodeler says he is optimistic people will start maximizing more modest amounts of space rather than trying to eke out every possible square foot.

"Part of it is keeping up with the Joneses," Miller says. "You look at television, and there are these people with seemingly no jobs who have large houses."

Maya and Tom Frost say they've experienced home-life on the way up but prefer the way down. During the 1990s, the couple and their four daughters lived in a 2,500-square-foot house in Forest Grove, where they ran two businesses.

A trek through India and Nepal, sleeping six to a room, convinced the family they had too much space back home.

After returning to Oregon, the Frosts bought a 1,900-square-foot home in Washington County's Rock Creek area. Each girl was allowed to fill one cardboard box with personal items; extras went to charity.

The family banned phones and televisions from bedrooms and put the only computer in the unheated garage. The Frosts say their tactics worked: They eat sitting on the floor around a table and gather on a heated carpet to watch television. A long work table serves as homework central.

"We were on a track to get more, more, more," Maya Frost says. "We took ourselves off that track."

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ILLUSTRATION: 6 Photo by Patrick Sullivan - The Oregonian

Sidebar - Moving on Up Perfect Fit Less is More

Graphic by Steve Cowden - The Oregonian Household Comparisons - 1050 vs 2000

Photo Caption: Houses in the United States have gone the way of french fries, waistlines and sport utility vehicles: They've been supersized.

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Published correction ran Tuesday, March 15, 2005: * Tom and Maya Frost's four daughters have attended Westview High School. An article Monday about home sizes named an incorrect high school.

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MOVING ON UP FAMILY: ANDY AND HEATHER DOERN AND

MOVING ON UP

Family: Andy and Heather Doern and daughter, Anna Rose, 5 months

Dwelling: Contemporary-style house in Happy Valley

Measurements: 3,287 square feet, 3 bedrooms, 2-1/2 bathrooms

Lifestyle: Andy is a real estate agent; Heather owns a beauty salon. They've rearranged their space and time now that they have a baby.

Housing history: This is Andy and Heather's second home together. They bought it new in 2002 for more square footage, an open feel and potential gain in value.

Raves: Large, open kitchen; spacious master bathroom; floor plan that flows.

Rants: Andy says he'd like more entertaining space and guest quarters. Heather has some reservations about the upkeep on large houses.

Dream house: The Doerns plan to build what Andy calls his ideal home, re-creating the current floor plan but adding a basement with a bonus room and fourth bedroom.

Reflection: "A house is the biggest investment most people make," Andy says. "You have to look at your return."

PERFECT FIT

Family: Andrea and Pat Lautenbach and son, Jake, 1 year

Dwelling: Modern home in Cedar Mill neighborhood of Washington County

Measurements: 2,919 square feet, 4 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms

Lifestyle: Pat, a minister, and Andrea, an orthodontist, stagger their work days so one of them is usually home with Jake.

Housing history: The Lautenbachs owned a smaller, Colonial-style house in Beaverton until 2003.

Rave: Entertainment space; upscale finishes; ease of staying organized when there's a place for everything.

Rant: Pat and Andrea wish they had a bigger yard for Jake to play in, but new homes on large lots were out of their price range.

Dream house: The Lautenbachs are happy for now but eventually plan to look for that elusive yard.