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## Rated Family Friendly

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Space to frolic indoors and out --don't pooh-poooh the suburbs just yet

Alex Newman, National Post



Tyler Anderson, National Post

Lampooned in movies, TV and books, the suburbs have always been maligned, but is it as bad as urbanites think? In this first of a three-part series, Post Homes looks at the differences in home sizes and prices.

Trading a 1,000-square-foot semi along the Danforth for an 1,800-sq.-ft. home in the suburbs of Thornhill made sense 10 years ago to TV producer Carolyn Meland and her family.

Affordable space, a huge wooded yard, and a casual lifestyle seemed a fair exchange for the long daily commute downtown for Ms. Meland and her husband.

They still think so today. "We could live in the city for what we paid here," Ms. Meland says. "But it was a lifestyle choice-- the home, the pool, the 40 trees in the backyard -- it's like a retreat. In fact, we enjoy it so much, there's no inclination to head north in the summer."

And with shops, a Starbucks, a library and a big park just a few minutes' walk away, meeting people and becoming part of the community was easy.

If real estate sales statistics of the past several months are any indication, a lot of people are feeling the same way. Last year, condos outsold low-rise homes, but the trend reversed in 2009, according to Building, Industry & Land Development (BILD) president Stephen Dupuis.

A major reason is price. As Mr. Dupuis puts it, "the recession turned the math around. Buyers may have wanted low-rise-905, but their budget was 416-condo."

This holds true even in the moveup market, according to a recent study by Coldwell Banker Terrequity Realty that compares move-up home prices in 16 GTY communities. Downtown, \$997,637 will get you a moveup four-bedroom, 2½-bath home in a great neighbourhood, whereas Pickering-- half an hour drive away --offers the same for \$373,666.

Since land and material costs continue to rise, new-home builders had to get creative with layout and design in order to keep costs down. Interior space was smaller, but better designed, lots decreased, and builders also "got creative with financing," Mr. Dupuis says.

Happily, the shift coincided with a tide of younger buyers weaned on condos and accustomed to smaller, well-designed spaces.

Applying condo principles to low-rise homes was an aim for Liza Communities, says CEO Maryam Mansouri. "You can have a really comfortable lifestyle in 1,700 sq. ft., if the floor plan is well thought out. And if choosing that-- over 3,000 sq. ft. -- reduces the price, allowing you to be closer to work and reduce the commute, it's better all around."

Even a 1,200-sq.-ft. stacked townhouse with a thoughtful main floor plan and two or three bedrooms with one bath upstairs is enough to feather a small family's nest, as long as you "invest in what's timeless," Ms. Mansouri says. "Architecture and aesthetics garner maximum enjoyment as well as resale value. Then save money and space elsewhere. For example, double sinks in the bathroom could eliminate your need for that second upstairs bathroom."

At Empire Communities, sales staff is trained to help buyers examine their lifestyle needs and personal behaviours before signing on the dotted line. "Buyers, especially those the first time out, tend to overestimate the space they require," says executive vice-president Paul Golini. "They have friends with a 3,000-sq.-ft. house and they like it, and figure that's what they need."

In his experience, though, what works is generally about 500 sq. ft. less than buyers originally think. "It's a matter of getting down to what counts -- quality time with family," he says. "No more grand staircases and small front parlours -- better to give that space over to the family room, and create an environment where everyone can actually speak to each other."

Mr. Dupuis figures the ideal size for a family of four is around 2,000 sq. ft. or even less. "We're seeing a return to quality over quantity, and size is not the only criterion. Layout and sustainability is in people's minds to some degree, and affordability for sure, so 2,000 sq. ft. will get you a very

workable floor plan."

Shona Fitzgerald, a designer who serves many 905 clients, agrees. "It's not size, but layout that matters. A total of 2,000 sq. ft. is great, but it has to have all the elements: an area set aside for dining with a large table; a family room, with TV connected to the kitchen, and a main floor home office/library, without TV."

A small room on the main floor that offers a private, noise-free zone for adults is a prized piece of real estate, Ms. Fitzgerald adds.

The "away room" figures largely in Sarah Susanka's book *The Not So Big House*. "What most people long for is shelter and comfort. But with most of us using words like 'spacious' and 'expansive,' houses keep getting larger."

Far from "advocating people live in small houses and get used to feeling cramped," Ms. Susanka says there are ways to decrease size -- dispensing with rooms that are rarely used, for instance -- and still have a very workable home.

As for the ideal size -- that depends on your financial situation, your personal preferences and the ages and stages of your family. That computer loft might be wasted on your toddlers, for example, but in a few years it will be a great spot for teenagers to study and have privacy.

Ms. Meland agrees. Once their daughters moved into the tween stage, she and her husband knew their 1,800 sq. ft. wouldn't work quite so well. They wanted a room for each girl-- the third bedroom operated as a home office -- and with three women in the house they needed more than one bathroom on the second floor.

Two years ago, the Meland family moved to a larger suburban home in Old Thornhill. Ms. Meland says it wasn't size but flow that sold them, because the layout worked so well with their lifestyle. "Now the girls can have a life and we can still have privacy," Ms. Meland says. "They can invite lots of friends for sleepovers, and we all have enough space."

A living and dining area open to the kitchen on one side, and a family room on the other allowed them to entertain the way they like: "We are big on dinner parties. We love to have people over -- lots of relatives, tons of kids. There's an endless stream of people through here."

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