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# Smaller South Bay Houses Appear an Economic Necessity



A bulldozer sits on an excavated plot of land near the corner of W. 120th Street and Van Ness Avenue in Hawthorne, one of several housing project sites city officials say have been put on hold because of the economic downturn.

### By Erik Derr

One of the first things Harold Roth wondered when he moved to California was how folks survived without basements or attics. Since houses on the West Coast, he reasoned, generally weren't built with storage spaces above or below like homes in the East, what did people do? "You have to put your stuff someplace," he said. "So, you either get a larger house or rent a storage unit." Which is why Roth, now the Director of Planning and Community Development for the City of Hawthorne, and other local experts think recent media reports heralding a new era of smaller homes may be a bit premature, at least in the South Bay. "I think it will be very difficult to change that desire for larger houses," said Roth. "We're still materialistic; we still want to buy things."

Much of the design buzz was based on statistics released in June by the American Institute of Architects, which showed a market shift toward smaller home styles. The group's quarterly survey of 500 architectural firms indicated the average size of houses designed by respondents decreased significantly from the previous year. Those figures corresponded with data from the National Association of Home Builders showing the average size of a home in 2008 was 2,600 square feet, compared to an average 2,300 square feet today.

The findings reportedly fit the kind of consumer paradigm shift promoted by architect and author Sarah Susanka, who has built a successful career advocating for smaller, smarter buildings. During the 10-year anniversary of her 1998 book, *The Not So Big House*, she described the trend toward less expansive homes as "a new ethic" that could eventually become "as commonplace as is recycling today."

Said Susanka: "As more and more people build or remodel homes that satisfy in quality rather than quantity, there will be a huge shift in what we perceive as desirable...in years to come, the movement will be more obvious — away from bigger and toward better." Such ideas are admirable, said Roth, but in Hawthorne, where new house-building is rare, existing homes nonetheless need to grow, just to catch up to the times. "It's a matter of bringing them up from functional obsolescence."

A great number of the community's single family units, ranging between 800 and 1,000 square feet, remain largely unchanged from when they were built in the post-World War II years. So, even though most building in the city was halted after the economic downturn hit in 2007, many homeowners during the housing boom chose to expand and improve their existing houses.

Perry Banner, Lawndale Planning Manager, says his city saw similar market trends around the same time. In his community, however, the ratio of renters to homeowners is about 60-40 percent. Neither Hawthorne nor Lawndale have had to deal very much with property owners wanting to build overly-sized — and often architecturally bereft — houses, even

though, as Roth said, "the more expensive the lot, the more expensive the house."

The same can't be said for the cities of El Segundo or Manhattan Beach, each of which saw several of those so-called "McMansions" sprout before officials pruned their growth with codes aimed at ensuring "neighborhood compatibility," said El Segundo Mayor Kelly McDowell. Both cities have put in place new design requirements for, among other characteristics, property setbacks, open space and articulated edifices.

Manhattan Beach has tried to develop a building environment that encourages homeowners to hold onto their current houses and simply add on if they need more space," said Planning Manager Laurie Jester. The codes include special allowances for owners who agree to limit any remodeling to a certain percentage of an existing structure.

Owners who seek to incorporate open space options or green technologies are eagerly welcomed by both cities. Even with heightened focus on the environment-friendly designing, though, neither Jester nor McDowell see their communities embracing the "smaller but better" approach any time soon. Beyond the limitations imposed by city code restrictions or, simply, the costliness of construction, "the people who are building brand new houses here, custom or specialty homes...still want the largest home they can," said Jester. "The homes have not gotten smaller."

McDowell knows of a few "empty-nesters" who traded in their larger houses for easier-to-maintain units, and also younger couples without the savings for "grandiose" abodes. Other than that, he as well hasn't seen a migration away from larger inventory. "I don't see the brand new houses being smaller. Nope." El Segundo is home to many of the most sophisticated, well-educated and environmentally-minded people around, asserted McDowell. And one of the most significant ways environmentalism translates in his city is a desire for "the newest and latest and greatest gadgets and technology," which requires space.

"We are seeing a trend toward spending less on houses," said Ben Morey, President of Signal Hill-based Morey Construction and the only remodeling specialist to sit on the board of directors for the Building Industry Association's Los Angeles/Ventura chapter. "The size of the house is no longer the driver behind a project," he said, "and there's also a willingness to accept less square feet in a design, make more efficient use of the space available and eliminate clutter...there's definitely more interest shown by homeowners in keeping costs down and making intelligent decisions."

But even in free-thinking California, "people are only willing to go so far for their ideals," said Morey. "Here's the issue. When you get into cost, even when you're talking about green issues, there's a reluctance to do more when it comes down to dollars and cents."