

Rising land costs prompt builders to wedge homes into smaller lots

By Betty Beard
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Yards are getting so tiny that in some cases you practically need to substitute a hibachi for a barbecue and a potted plant for a tree.

As land costs continue to rise, a type of urban housing more common in densely populated cities in the East, California and Europe is showing up more in the Valley, even in suburban communities such as Ahwatukee Foothills, Avondale, Chandler and Gilbert.

It's a normal-size, single-family, detached house, usually two-story, on a small lot with virtually no yard.

They are one of the latest symbols of increasing residential density in the core of the Valley, at least for new construction. More condos and lofts are being built; apartments are being converted to condos. Single-family homes are being jammed together and are sometimes called cottages. In some cases, condos and single-family homes are indistinguishable.

The trend feels odd in a region

Shrinking lots

Residential lots have been shrinking for years. Decades ago, it was common to see home sites of 8,000 to 9,000 square feet. Today, some have shrunk to less than 3,000 square feet.

Based on an analysis of lot sizes in new subdivisions with 10 or more homes, Hanley Wood Market Intelligence found that lots have continued to shrink since 2000.

The average lot size in 2000 was 8,427 square feet. In 2006, it is 7,434.

where the standard for decades has been spread-out homes with yards big enough for a pool. But builders say the trend toward smaller residential lots and yards started 10 to 15 years ago.

Homes built in the 2000s have smaller yards than those built in the 1990s. The average size of a residential lot for a new production

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home in Maricopa and Pinal counties shrank 1,000 square feet in the past six years, to about 7,400 square feet, according to Hanley Wood Market Intelligence.

The closer you get to the Phoenix core, the more likely lots are to be 3,000 or 4,000 square feet.

"A lot of new products (lots) are 32 by 100 feet deep," said John Fioramonti, managing director of Hanley Wood.

"You can go to Coolidge and Florence and still see the 6,000- to 7,000-square-foot standard lots we are used to. As you get closer into town, you find these vertical podium builds, very narrow two- to three-story almost town homes. They have been doing this in California for years.

"You are seeing densities of eight to nine homes per acre and lots down to 4,000 square feet or less. That was unheard-of three years ago."

Home analyst RL Brown, publisher of the Phoenix Housing Market Letter, calls these two-story houses on small lots "absolutely obnoxious."

While he acknowledged it's hard to offer larger lots today, he said: "They look like something out of a Monopoly game. It's almost like street scenes from the East Coast with two- and three-story brownstones touching or almost touching. ... This is just non-traditional for the Southwest."

Dennis Herrig, vice president of sales and marketing for Randall Martin Homes,

"You are seeing densities of eight to nine homes per acre and lots down to 4,000 square feet or less. That was unheard-of three years ago."

John Fioramonti

Managing director, Hanley Wood Market Intelligence

said: "There definitely is a demand for this. If there weren't, we wouldn't build it. It lets the builder provide a finished home at a lower overall cost.

"Your choices are buying further out in the hinterlands and having an extra commute. When you buy new homes closer in, almost invariably it is on a smaller lot."

Less maintenance

Builders say they are constructing more homes with minuscule yards because it's the best way to make closer-in new homes more affordable, and many buyers want less yard maintenance.

Although these types of houses are usually marketed to people without children, Ahwatukee Foothills resident Frank Webb, who works in the food business, bought a four-bedroom home at the Tapestry at Club West development in western Ahwatukee Foothills for his family of five, which includes boys ages 7, 12 and 14.

"I am not interested in spending all my time doing yardwork. I want to spend time with my kids," he said. Also, there is a community park and pool nearby.

The new house cost about \$305,000. He looked at existing houses in Ahwatukee Foothills and found comparable

four-bedrooms would have cost \$375,000 or more, would have been 10 to 20 years old and required yardwork.

First-time home buyers Carly and Richard Fife bought a 1,600-square-foot house with almost no yard in Park Place Village in Gilbert because they didn't want maintenance. They have a 2-year old son and are buying a larger house, about 1,900 square feet, in Gilbert. It also won't have much of a yard. "It is so nice not to have to worry about the maintenance," she said. "We came from a tiny apartment, so this is great for us, especially with a new baby."

No room to play

Despite the value, others miss the more traditional house and yard.

Erika Zuniga, a mother of three boys and a baby girl, is renting a four-bedroom house with no yard at Waterford Square in Avondale. She doesn't like it. There is no room for the family Labrador to play. She has to watch her kids closely because the distance from the front door to the street is only about 12 feet. She won't open the blinds over the dining-room window because the window is about five or six feet from a neighbor's window.

"This is like an apartment, but it's huge," she said.

Most cities and towns have been approving these small-lot developments not only to give residents more affordable homes but also to encourage more of a community feel. The Agritopia development in Gilbert, with its small lots, white picket fences and 1950s retro feel, is an example.

Reed Porter, president of Trend Homes, said "I think a lot of home builders and land planners are trying to create the intimate traditional feel of older cities."

Linda Edward, Gilbert's acting planning director, said this wave of higher-density, creative-village concepts is just coming out of the gate and will increase over the next three to five years.

"We are in the midst of new designs for urban living, neo-traditional, very pedestrian friendly with walkways, open space and not so many walls, and neighborhood shopping close."

Webb, the Ahwatukee Foothills resident, doesn't like the typical suburban model found throughout the southeast Valley that has residents driving into garages and closing their doors, rarely to be seen outdoors.

"I have lived here (Ahwatukee Foothills home) three years, and I couldn't tell you the names of five of my neighbors," he said. "I think a neighborhood like this (Tapestry) will be more of a tight-knit community."

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