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CHICAGO HOMES

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A house that's just right

Homebuyers become more practical about size of living spaces



KERI WIGINTON/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Sydney Fogel, 6, has had her own room since her Lake in the Hills family's move from a smaller home in May. Kim, her mother, says the family bought no more space than it needed.

BY ERIK J. MARTIN
Special to the Tribune

If Scott and Kim Fogel had a theme song, it would be "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Because, as the chorus reminds us, if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need, especially when it comes to a new home.

The Fogels weren't looking to make a showy statement in the move-up house they would eventually purchase. Instead of opting for formal, fancy and full size, they put their wish lists aside and chose a new home in Lake in the Hills that fulfilled their No. 1 priority: having separate bedrooms for their 10- and 6-year-old daughters.

"With our second home, we could've gone bigger, but we weren't totally comfortable with that," said Scott, 40, who in May moved his family from their 1,680-square-foot starter home three blocks away to a newly built single-family residence, measuring about 2,500 square feet, in Orleans Homes' Cheswick Place development.

The Fogels' two-story abode includes four bedrooms, 2½ baths, a family room that opens to the kitchen, a connected living and dining room, a full basement and a two-car attached garage.

"I looked at every floor plan (the builder) offered and thought the

plans with five to six bedrooms were fabulous," said Kim, 39. "But then I put my practical hat on and asked myself, 'Who's going to clean it? Why buy more wasted space?' In the end, we bought what we needed, not a house that was too big. We're very practical people."

The Fogels aren't alone. Statistics show most buyers prefer homes that are more moderately sized and modestly appointed than those of a few years ago.

Based on the latest numbers from the U.S. census, the average size of a new single-family American home in 2010 was 2,392 square feet, down from its all-time high average of 2,521 square feet in 2007.

Meanwhile, real estate website Trulia has released survey results indicating 32 percent of Americans say their ideal home size ranges from 1,400 to 2,000 square feet, up from 28 percent in 2010.

The evidence is clear: The new-construction American home is shrinking, and buyers are willing to eliminate rooms deemed unnecessary or reconfigure living spaces for greater efficiency.

The economic downturn, of course, has a lot to do with these trends.

"Home sizes have always declined during recessions," said Kermit Baker, chief economist with the American Institute of Architects. "This one was more severe than recent recessions, and the



The Fogels' home in the Cheswick Place development measures about 2,500 square feet.

falloff has been more dramatic."

Consequently, buyers are looking for more affordable new homes, which means square footage will correspondingly decrease, Baker said. But while affordability is a major factor contributing to smaller home designs, it's not the sole cause.

Wants versus needs

"Buyers today aren't looking for the McMansions anymore. In general, buyers are looking for smaller homes, and demographics point toward this trend," said Curt Van Hyfte, president of the Illinois division of PulteGroup Inc. "When you look at the U.S. population and census data, the 65-plus population will account for 20 percent of the U.S. population in 2050. This buyer segment wants less space in a home."

"When you look at the entry-level buyer, typically these are young adults who often don't need a ton of space. They may be tired of renting an apartment, yet want an affordable home, which skew toward smaller homes."

Case in point: Tony and Courtney Pacione, first-time buyers in their mid-30s who claimed a 1,480-square-foot, two-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath town house in Pulte's Arlington Crossings community in Arlington Heights. They got the bigger master bedroom with a walk-in closet they were hoping for, as well as extra storage space and the second bedroom that Tony converted into a home office/guest suite. The couple sacrificed a few items on their wish list, such as a center island in the kitchen.

"Can we afford a slightly bigger home? Yeah. But do we really need one? No," said Tony, who plans to move up to a second home ranging from 1,800 to 2,400 square feet if he becomes a father someday. "Why make myself house rich and cash poor and have to work my butt off when we can easily get by with something less? We were looking more for value and efficiency versus having the biggest house on the block."

Jan and Dennis Chojnacki are on the

other end of the demographic spectrum. As empty nesters, they valued low maintenance, fewer stairs and a new detached house that decreased their living space. They sold their 3,200-square-foot, two-story home in St. Charles and moved in November into a 2,086-square-foot Prairie ranch model in the Tanna neighborhood in Mill Creek, Shodeen Homes' master-planned golf course community in Geneva. Despite sacrificing nearly 1,100 square feet, they have three bedrooms, three full baths, a family room, a study, a laundry room and a large foyer.

Jan said there was a lot of unused space in their old home, "and we realized we needed something with more flexibility that also offered a single-level lifestyle."

Practical spaces

Not all buyer segments prefer less square footage, however. Hyfte said PulteGroup's internal research shows move-up buyers are drifting away from formal areas like dining and living rooms, "but they don't necessarily want a smaller home. They want more usable, practical spaces."

"Trade-offs are necessary when the overall footprint decreases, and many young families prefer that a portion of the former living room area be pushed into the great room," said Stephen Melman, director of economic services for the National Association of Home Builders.

For many years Orren Pickell, founder and CEO of Lake Bluff-based Orren Pickell Designers & Builders, was known for his larger-than-life estates that boasted more than enough space for work and play.

"For a while, clients felt the bigger the better," said Pickell. "What we're seeing now is a shift toward smaller spaces without compromising the 'wow' factor."

The trend is also dictated by the way families live.

"Less than 10 years ago, it would've been unheard of to build a custom home without



KERI WIGINTON/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

For the Fogels — from left in top photo, Sydney, 6, Amy, 10, Kim and Scott — getting separate bedrooms for the girls was the top priority in their move last spring to a 2,500-square-foot house. In bottom photo, Amy basks in her own space.

a formal dining area," said Pickell. "Yet, today many families gravitate toward more casual spaces with an open floor plan rather than extra rooms with designated purposes."

Indeed, special function rooms have seen substantial declines in interest since 2010, including media rooms/home theaters, pet rooms, exercise rooms, kids or guest wings and interior greenhouses, according to a recent home-design trends survey by the American Institute of Architects. However, demand remains strong for home offices, outdoor living spaces and mudrooms.

Open layouts

The AIA further reports that today's home layouts have been simpler and floor plans are more flexible, with open layouts growing in popularity and informal living space remaining in demand.

In addition to saying goodbye to formal dining and living areas, homebuyers are saying hello to a variety of spaces that are expected to be standard inclusions, said Hyfte. Among these are flex spaces on the main level that can be used for activities like exercise or gaming; planning centers off the great room used to pay bills and do homework; larger, informal kitchens that can accommodate up to a 10-person table;

oversize kitchen pantries and storage areas; and expanded laundry rooms and mudrooms.

At several Orleans Homes Chicago-area communities, amenities that maximize space and cater to the preferences of contemporary buyers have been introduced. These include pocket offices, bonus rooms built over the garage, and flex rooms that can be used for virtually anything.

"Breakfast rooms off the kitchen and sitting rooms in the master bedroom used to be really big, but now the majority of our buyers won't opt for those living spaces," said Liz Kruse, director of sales and marketing for the Chicago division of Orleans Homes, which offers single-family home plans ranging from 2,487 to 3,960 square feet, down from about 3,000 to 4,400 square feet five years ago. "Also, secondary bedrooms today are a little smaller on average, often without walk-in closets."

When determining how much living space is required, Hyfte said, new-home shoppers should ask themselves several important questions, including: How many bedrooms do I really need? Can my children share a room? Will I entertain a lot and need a formal dining room or would a large kitchen with an oversize dining area suffice? Do I need an office or can I carve out space in the basement for one?