

McMansions Across America

Jan-Paul Malocsay

Housing in America—what on earth is going on? Owning your own home has always been central to the so-called American dream, but has dreaming pre-empted reality? At a time when America's consumption of the planet's energy resources is (to put it mildly) in dispute worldwide, why has this nation's typical single family "dream home" doubled in size from what it was thirty years ago? Why has it become a kind of monster machine being used to grow an ever more monstrous consumer economy? Why is an American house nowadays many times more expensive to build and "run," which is to say more outrageously wasteful and environmentally irresponsible, than ever before?

I'm afraid my view of this subject is as astonished, outraged and alarmist as that paragraph suggests. I do have plenty of company, though the company I keep in this respect isn't setting national policy. Forced to describe us in a single word, I would have to choose environmentalist, a word the present administration in Washington D.C. is working overtime to demonize, and sadly successfully too, I fear.

In certain moods I'd call us planetarians. But that won't do. I haven't seen planetarian in print or heard it used, possibly just as well. It sounds too much like yet another kooky cult or sect hatched out in California's broad daylight.

And that's a pity too, since now we know for sure that environment is global, not local or regional, and certainly not to be defined in

terms of shifty-eyed political or national "priorities." Isn't that the crying shame of America's refusal to sign the Kyoto accords on global warming? Doesn't it look like a greedy, self-centered USA is turning its back on a worldwide effort to help us all think more clearly about the planet we all share?

Interestingly enough, the environmental study of ecology takes its name from the ancient Greek *oikos*, the word for house. Economy is another word with that same root. An environmentalist just naturally thinks about the connection there for two reasons. First, because household economy is everyone's everyday business on the individual level all around the world. Secondly, because all the world's a household now, an increasingly global economy of individuals and nations whose decisions about the everyday business of life grow more interactive every day.

An American environmentalist has an additional reason for thinking about the world household economy: the USA, in that sense, is The Big House, home of the American Dream Home, a consumer economy creation with a nightmare monster appetite for the nation's and the world's resources.

Now wait just a doggone minute here, you say, lapsing into a slightly Japanese-accented American drawl expressive of disbelief. If the American Dream Home is really such a monster, why aren't Americans up in arms about it? You make it sound like Gojira is swaggering down Main Street America, unnoticed in the crowd.

Shouldn't we be talking, at worst, about a monster stimulus to a sluggish economy? Aren't these houses a major indicator of economic growth as it is understood in the USA? Isn't "growing the economy" a pet political phrase there? If those hundreds of thousands of magnificent houses sprouting up all across the country aren't growth, what is? Aren't they real estate? Don't they last far longer than, say, the high-end designer handbag bought on the Ginza by a hard-working Japanese woman with no hope of ever owning such a place?

Even better, you add, warming to your argument, isn't every such house a kind of economic powerhouse? Doesn't it generate decades of debt energy (call it) as the owners dedicate years of their lives to working hard to pay the outsize mortgage and maintenance costs of such a house? And what about lifestyle costs? Doesn't housing so ambitious generate on-going purchasing power too as all those rooms fill up and empty and refill with consumer goods?

And anyway, you conclude, raising your voice like many Americans do in discussions of this topic, what kind of impossibly hyper-critical environmentalist grouch could fail to fall in love with such an agreeable monstrosity?

Maybe the thing to say is that I'm willing to play the environmentalist grouch, just in case it may do some good. I should add that I have personal as well as ideological reasons for picking a fight with the monster dream home. Like millions of Americans, I have seen its expansive/expensive demands price me out of the market for the sensible, affordable housing I would prefer. The best I can do at present is cling to the hope that some day I can offer Chart Network a true life account of what it's like to look for, find, and actually buy a house that can work for such as me.

Meantime, I have to fear that the exceedingly modest house I have in mind may never be affordable. The inflationary spiral in high-end

real estate is raising low-end prices as well. Houses I looked at for \$80,000 four years ago now go for half again as much. And when the high-end housing bubble comes to bust, as all such market manias must, the demand for modest housing will surely rise in response to demand created by high-end losers needing to downsize.

That evil day is yet to come, so Gojira can go on dreaming. If he has the inclination, and the money, to shop for housing in America, he will have plenty of monster dream homes to choose from.

I don't know who thought of calling them McMansions, but that bit of wordplay is right on target. Like McDonald's, these monstrosities are found all across the land. Like McDonald's definitively famous Big Mac, these houses speak for the American tendency to advertise quality by way of quantity. The likeness grows more telling the more you think about it. Think, for example, how both these phenomena speak for the irresistible popularity of undeniable vulgarity.

The difference in price and commitment is thought-provoking too. It costs just a couple of bucks to open wide for a Big Mac. You walk away from a burger debt-free. The stress on your waistline can be dieted away. But call a McMansion home and you're committed to long years of mortgage, maintenance and lifestyle costs that are by any measure huge.

So why do builders continue to work overtime to keep up with demand in spite of a sluggish economy and a witches brew of future uncertainties at home and abroad? Apparently millions of Americans firmly believe that this form of extravagant housing is affordable now and even profitable in the long run as building costs and real estate values spiral upward together happily every after. Ironically, the economic slump has fed this belief with interest rates so low that monthly

mortgage payments on enormous debt now seem routinely manageable. But can so much debt, assumed by so many, be the good thing that millions of Americans think it is? Is this dream home economy a sustainable reality?

That, sad to say, is a question as large as the politics of the world's so-called superpower. Like the consumer society's car of choice, the gas-guzzling SUV (sports utility vehicle), the McMansion speaks for this country's inability to control its appetite for energy and a host of other resources whose getting and spending has serious consequences worldwide. Even those who glory in consumption see the problems looming there. But of course they also tend to put their trust in good ole Yankee ingenuity updated and upgraded into hi-tech innovation. They see no reason why Americans shouldn't go on living "better" than the rest of the world.

It's easy to see why the average American doesn't rise to the environmentalist challenge to "act locally think globally." Doing that to any significant extent requires commitment to forms of moderation that will never be popular in a country whose cultural model runs on surplus and excess. Environmentalism has changed our way of thinking, but not our way of living. The McMansion economy is a natural consequence of that unhappy contradiction.

So what is a McMansion exactly? A Japanese tourist could tell at a glance, I'm sure. I feel like a tourist myself, driving past these things a good half dozen years now. Somehow I can't overcome a feeling of something suddenly strangely wrong, even as I argue with that feeling. *Oh for pity sake stop being such an everlasting environmentalist grouch*, I tell myself. *This is the new American reality. You might as well get used to it. Nothing you think or say will make it go away.*

All right then. Let me try to define the beast. A McMansion is more than merely

sizeable. It has a look of sudden, bold ambition to stand proud. Like a brand new appliance, it looks fresh out of the box. Everything about it aims for crisp and clean. Any house-proud person might aim for crisp and clean but a McMansion has the look of mania, of fakery in control of cherished high ideal. That too might pass for culturally fit. Faking it is as American as store-bought homemade apple pie. We were building McMansions long before the American dream became a Hollywood set or the stuff of glossy magazines. Thousands of 19th Century houses all across the land attest to that. So why not update and harken back? Why not indulge a taste for McMansions legitimized by cutesy homebody details like wreaths on doors and electric candles in windows?

The alert Japanese student of English will take note of the snide effect of -sy tacked onto cute. Like artsy, cutesy passes judgment on those who try too hard to achieve the desired effect. Also implicit in that judgment is the notion that those who go in for artsy/cutesy are deficient in the self-critical faculty.

I did consider editing cutesy out, but let it stand and suffer explanation because the term McMansion is in general use and does imply criticism generally understood, if hard to explain. Outsize debt and dimensions are the easy part. Poking fun is easy too. McMansions have an indisputable tendency to showy bad taste, to unconscious parody of their own aspirations to "the good life." There's nothing new in that. Houses, like castles and clothes, are the natural allies of conspicuous bad taste. So why not just laugh and drive on by? Why risk the unhappiness of being a grouch who takes these monstrosities too seriously?

Maybe it's time to confess my horrid secret.

No. Not yet. The grouch has more to say. He's not the only passer-by alarmed by the sudden loss of landscape to these things.

Here's how it happens.

A McMansion worth a million or more would prefer to rear up in splendid isolation, though even in that price range the majority cluster in a manner convenient to speculation. These groupings are called developments because developers specialize in "developing" land not built on before. They got off to a running start with "GI Joe houses" after World War II. At least those tickytacky little boxes gave families affordable places to live. That kind of development continues, though less affordably now, thanks to rising housing costs in general. Also at work are low-budget imitations of the McMansion phenomenon. But no more of that.

McMansion development begins with utter devastation as bulldozers create the desired landscape of curving streets and irregular lots. Americans see this as the spacious antidote to urban congestion and social ills and inconveniences of every kind. Bulldozers are also vital to affordability since McMansions, by definition, demand a complex infrastructure designed to satisfy their outsize traffic, power, and plumbing needs. Some attempt may be made to spare existing natural features like a stand of fine old trees, but business is business. Beauty must either pay its way or stand aside and let utility do the dirty work.

The word development itself has an interesting relationship to this process and the living space it creates. Development used to share the positive connotations of that quintessentially American value word: progress. That was before progress had to negotiate with environmentalists. Development is now part of that language of negotiation. Those in favor say development. Those opposed say sprawl.

People still talk of living "in a development" but that will change. Too bad they won't be persuaded to talk of living "in a sprawl." That might shed light on the issues and make us

grouches happy. But developers aren't dumb. They have a new word ready: community. Look for it on the sign that names their latest bold achievement. The smaller print underneath says something like: *A Community of Luxury Homes.*

Since the language of advertizing is the lifeblood of American culture and commerce, McMansions are bought and sold on the strength of dreams and promises conveyed by certain key words. Community is one. Luxury is another. Both speak for "the good life" Americans aspire to, especially when buying a home.

Obviously, the dream/promise power of such words is tied to purchasing power. You can guess why the dream/promise word luxury isn't used in the low-end housing markets where I shop. Community there has real and difficult meanings—but more about that some other time. In the McMansion marketplace, community and luxury are commodities fresh out of the box and priced accordingly. How well they hold their value over time only time can tell.

That marketplace, at present, works like this. McMansion developments under construction post a sign whose price cue reads something like "from \$464,000." A figure that close to \$465,000 means that the buyer will be offered a range of options limited only by the amount of debt they (or their money lender) feel "comfortable" with. Comfortable is a word much used in negotiations of every kind in this country, in business and in personal relations.

The "from" mechanism can be wickedly effective in adding extras the purchaser would never think affordable in any other context. The seller's expectation is that going into debt for many thousands softens most people's everyday sales resistance to features costing just a few.

The seller is apt to be sadly right, especially if the optimistic glow of this high-cost moment can be made to catch fire with promise of selling at a profit later on. That promise just naturally argues for all manner of “luxury” extras seen as guarantees of better resale value. The recent spectacular run-up in housing prices appears to support that outcome. No wonder so many are forgetting that a house is a place to live, not an investment opportunity for the average person.

As it is, “new housing starts” are looked to as “a leading economic indicator.” Interest rates remain at historic lows. People are spending on homes and home improvements as if our national security depended on it. Who knows? Maybe 9/11 has something to do with it. Maybe deep-debt euphoria is a diagnosable disease and highly contagious. Maybe more dreamers need to wake up in time to see what’s at the rainbow’s end: a mountain of debt and a house some debtor will be sorry to own.

This isn’t a drive-by opinion. This is a live-in opinion. That’s my horrid secret.

It could be worse. I could be writing about a house with my name on the deed. But I’m not. It’s the house of a friend, someone I’ve known for over thirty years. She’s a highly successful executive, wise in the ways of the world, far better at looking out for her interests than I could ever hope to be.

She bought this McMansion for all the “right” reasons: brand-new, trouble-free housing in a highly desirable, upscale gated community. She probably won’t lose money when she moves in four or five years. Even if the market crashes, this villa should enjoy the protection of wealthy neighbors with a golf course and club house to defend as well as McMansions worth millions.

Modest “villas” like my friend’s are priced from \$244,000. They could seem affordable for some years to come, especially given fringe

benefits like the expansive green vistas created by the golf course. (Participation there is optional and quite expensive.) A single woman with one dog and two cats doesn’t need a three bedroom house, much less extras like the huge hot tub in one of two full baths upstairs. But she was buying with selling in mind....

Living here from time to time this summer is part of a trade-off. She stores my household goods for a year or two. I build her a garden.

She is sometimes away so I have spent whole days alone with her house, studying its ways and means. Its complex machinery of comfort is impressive, extensive, automatic, a story in itself. But what does it cost to run? How efficient is it? Years of my life have gone to building and home repairs. I read the language of construction fairly well. My friend’s basement, like most, is an open book. It tells of workers in a hurry, an impression I get all through the house.

Needless to say, I can’t tell my friend, but every day here I’m more painfully aware that the grouch in me is entirely right. This house is a McMansion, a sometime thing, built in haste, not meant to last.

Talk about horrid secrets. Alone with the grouch I hear him grumble out loud: *This house will not be forgiving of everyday wear and tear. It won’t be found worthy of major repairs much less renovation decades from now. It might even have to be torn down before its debt retires. It’s ... dumpster architecture!*

The grouch walks the dog past villas and much more ambitious houses in all stages of construction. This development is nearing completion, even as others nearby are taking shape, crowding out more fields of cows and corn. The dog sniffs happily at the end of its leash. The grouch stands unhappily transfixed, thinking of Shakespeare: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.”

One thing I do discuss with my friend is

Development Social Discipline, a field of study invented for her benefit. (Yes, the grouch is that sly, that much in need of venting pent-up critical pressure.) Homeowners in high-end developments like this buy into a highly idealized form of the American dream. Look for it in any glossy magazine with ads selling products used around the house. Fresh and new, clean and bright, neat and tidy always always—there's the theme, the source of social energy and discipline vital to this ambitious variant on American free enterprise. It's a discipline missing from most low-budget developments where American individualism tends to effects of chaos and bad taste painful to contemplate.

Let two examples speak for many.

People walk the streets for exercise here, but development life is absolutely car dependent. (Don't get the grouch started on that one!) Even million dollar McMansions acknowledge that dependency with garage doors facing the street. These villas are absurdly truthful in that respect. Each has its domineering two-car garage and brief stretch of black asphalt drive. Walk-in front doors are tucked off to one side in various ways. A street of such houses, all painted alike, is awkward, monotonous, and painfully boring though nonetheless fascinating to the student of Development Social Discipline.

Fascination begins with this weird fact of American life: many, if not most, garages end up housing household junk, not cars. A low-end development accepts that fact. Garages there may fill to overflowing. Junk may sit outside with the family cars. Garage sales (also called yard sales) have become an American institution in my lifetime. Their purpose is to get rid of junk but junk just naturally replaces itself in a consumer society.

There's no public eyesore junk in a high-end place like this. As garage doors yawn

open and shut, letting cars and people in and out, one does see junk. But this is junk in moderation, junk in fairly good order, junk hugging the walls out of respect for the rights of cars. Developmental Social Discipline gets that right at least.

Besides, this high-end development offers the added luxury of basements clearly designed to take pressure off garages. People here can afford to lead secret packrat lives down there. (A packrat is a Western rodent whose nest accumulates vast amounts of desert landscape oddments and anything human that takes its fancy. Some nests are said to be centuries old.) What better example of private vice serving public virtue? My friend's basement is as large as the first floor of her two-story house. My small mountain of junk is stacked almost nine feet high along one wall. It looks lonely, there's so much space left. That space will yawn empty till my friend sells. She hates junk. I tell her that's unpatriotic. She calls my junk "the funeral pyre."

She wants to make a fuss because some people are parking their cars in the street overnight. That's not allowed, she says. The street is four cars wide, traffic extremely light. So what's the problem, fire truck access or control freak neatness?

My junk is in her basement so picking a fight won't do. Otherwise the grouch might wonder aloud if letting your dog water other people's lawns is really allowed. My friend is, in fact, extremely good about walking the dog, plastic bag in hand. So is the grouch, taking his turn, mortally embarrassed by that disgusting trespass on other people's grass. The dog is a sweetheart, by the way; the problem is human.

My friend is the perfectly well-organized CEO type, but somehow her copy of this development's rules and regulations has gone astray. I only have myself to blame. I let

the grouch peek out that day I found out about the special relationship between Development Social Discipline and white plastic fencing.

That's right. White plastic fencing. It serves a concept known as "curb appeal." There's a how-to television show called Curb Appeal. No lie. In the show, as in real life, landscapers and architects "improve" the look of a house from the street. Given the pandemic of home building and improvement now sweeping the country, one might think that attention paid to curb appeal would be a service to humanity. And to be fair, the TV show does try to teach people to improve their surroundings. I would say it invites people to think critically. The grouch insists that the vast majority must be declining the invitation. Why else would white plastic fencing be so widely available, much less an absolute requirement of curb appeal.

That fencing became a fact of grouch life when I set about making a garden for my friend. Her villa had just been finished. The landscaper had done his best, which is to say his worst, for curb appeal. He had no gift whatever for choosing, arranging or planting plants. That doesn't mean he doesn't know his business. The owners of these relatively modest villas don't have million-dollar expectations. They live in sight of significant landscape differences they accept as naturally as they do any other luxury related to McMansion price and ambition.

The level of taste in landscapes and gardens strikes me as surprizingly low at every level of expense in this development. But then I have to make allowances for my own professional biases. I'm afraid I see American landscaping and gardening becoming ever more hyped-up, overdone, artificial, vulgar—in a word, McMansionesque.

What really brings out the grouch in me is a corresponding neglect of the quiet, contented, hands-on care that ought to be central to the

pleasure of living with plants. Instead, predictably, house and garden and landscape share this highly mechanized, consumer-product-driven approach. The public is shown, and persuaded to want to own, a picture from the pages of a glossy magazine. It follows that sham effects like white plastic fencing acquire a certain value in high-end development living. The picture sets a standard for picture-perfect maintenance few people can really afford to match. But that's all right too, since people readily accept symbol in place of substance. Why else would virtual reality computer games be a growth industry along with "reality" TV programs like "Survivor"? Why else would people endanger themselves and the environment with debt for something as meretricious as a McMansion?

I do understand that streets of houses designed for uniform effect will seek uniformity of curb appeal in the landscaping out front. I was in fact surprized that homeowners here are allowed to garden in and around the landscaper's boring island beds of tedious shrubs and trees. I did want to offer classes in a garden variety of Development Social Discipline since people here have no idea how to groom their plants properly. If I lived here I'd do it too.

I had seen white plastic fencing before, in a far more expensive context too. One of my favorite clients put it out front of her wonderful 18th Century house. I drive 600 miles to help her only twice a year so that was her excuse. "I was only thinking of low maintenance," she said, pouring herself quite a stiff drink. "You won't even get that," I snapped. The grouch is no secret between us. I am happy to report that within a year that fence acquired a wonderfully revolting patina of roadside grime, grey mold, and green algae scum so thick that slugs leave wavering trails as they feed.

Here I approached the landscaper with a

smile and handshake as insincerely friendly as I could manage. Any chance we could just, um, forget about the fence at Villa 79 on Wistful Vista Drive? He was equally friendly but said, in effect, no chance, none at all. "We call it curb appeal," he said. The grouch wanted me to point out that curb could function as a verb as well as a noun; and that, as a verb, curb appeal could signal intent to limit or restrict appeal. That verb occurs in the old-fashioned phrase "curb your tongue," one of many ways of saying "just shut up."

That's what I did. The landscaper said he grew up on a dairy farm nearby. He looked like it too; big burly fellow, all muscle and no nonsense, used to bossing cows around. He did volunteer a choice. The obligatory two sections of fence (one four feet long, the other six) could go in one of two positions. I chose one, thanked him with a handshake, and left to run errands. By the time I got back the fence was in place.

The grouch says it shouldn't be possible to hate a white plastic fence more than you hate it on first sight. But we manage. My friend refuses to share our upset. The grouch

suggests that going into debt for a McMansion works that kind of miracle. The very size of the debt makes the debtor somehow more accepting.

I've been careful not to introduce the grouch to the neighbors. I did risk inviting various ones to think about the fence. I hinted that imitation white plastic wood might not be, well, quite good enough. No one took the hint. All said the same thing, in the same tone of naive surprise: "Yes but plastic never needs painting. It always looks good."

The grouch wanted to point out that it always looks like plastic too.

But that would never do. These neighbors have never been anything but nice. They watched in utter fascination as construction mud and mire became a lovely little garden. One said: "You really know what you're doing." Another said: "It looks like a garden in one of those magazines."

END

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