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Going small: home downsizing

The virtues of the smaller home attract home buyers again

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The age of the McMansion may be over, with smaller homes gaining favor among Americans. (Photo: iStockphoto)

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Misty Weaver and her family were living the American dream in 2006: The family of four lived in a 3,000-square-foot, four-bedroom, three-bath home in a beautiful Virginia suburb. Each of her two sons had his own bedroom, and Weaver, an avowed “neat freak,” never had to see their toothbrushes on her bathroom sink because they had separate bathrooms. With a kitchen, dining room, breakfast nook, eat-in bar, playroom and large kitchen, the family had room to spread out.

But it wasn’t long before Weaver felt like the family was *too* spread out.

“We never saw each other,” said Weaver, 32. “I’d be in my office and the kids would be watching TV in their bedrooms. I’d be making dinner and the kids would be in the playroom downstairs. We could never talk.”

Weaver’s solution was home downsizing — moving the family into an 800-square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bath home on a rambling 10-acre property in the Virginia countryside. Now the family talks all the time because they’re always just a few feet from one another, and Weaver couldn’t be happier.

Downsizing to 800 square feet may seem extreme, but Weaver is one of thousands of Americans who are downsizing due to the economy or out of preference. The U.S. Census found the average square footage of an American single-family home dropped from 2,541 in 2007 to 2,343 at the end of 2008. And a January survey by the **National Association of Home Builders** found 88 percent of its members plan to build smaller homes this year.

The age of the McMansion, it seems, may be over. Traditional-size homes are back in favor, association economist Stephen Melman says.

“Back in 1973, the average floor area of a new one-family home was 1,660 square feet,” he said. “So for older homes that were never enlarged, 1,500 square feet would not be unusual.”

The downsizing trend was inevitable, said John Raabe, a home designer and owner of [Country Plans](#), which sells designs for cabins and smaller homes.

“Over the past few decades, we’ve seen fewer people living in larger and larger homes,” he said. “We’re starting to see a reversal of that. Then you have a small cadre of conscious purchasing types who believe smaller is better — people who will forgo a 2,400-square-foot house for a 1,600-square-foot house and are willing to pay for it.”

Christine Harmel, 38, of Austin, built a home in Charleston, S.C., in 2005. At the time, homeowner association and planning rules prohibited her from building smaller than 2,400 square feet. She remembers being irked that she had to build two guest rooms upstairs that she never used. And she recalled neighbors who built a 4,000-square-foot house that lost its appeal after their children moved out.

“I had several neighbors who were retired and had built their huge dream house, but after several years of living in it, they got a cottage,” she said. “It was too much house.”

It’s not only too much house, but too expensive to keep up, said Stephanie Reiley, who contributes to [Small Living Journal](#). After a divorce, she downsized from a 3,000-square-foot house in Tucson, Ariz., to a 550-square-foot floating home in Portland, Ore., last year.

“A big house is almost a full-time job,” she said. “We had two different extermination services. We had landscapers. We had a pool man, air conditioner repair, a carpet cleaner, a maid. The place needed constant repair because it was an older historic adobe. And we were spending hours working to maintain the house and not enough in the house enjoying it.”

In Virginia, that’s no longer a problem for Weaver. Her electric bills shrunk with her square footage and, so far, the close quarters haven’t caused familial conflict. Her boys, Anthony, Jr., 10, and Matthew, 7, share a room on one side of the house, and she and husband Anthony have the master on the opposite side. Aside from having to look at her kids’ toiletries, she said she loves the new house, and how organized it is, with built-in storage for everything they need.

She hopes the large patio and her sons’ affinity for sports will keep them satisfied with the house as they age.

Now she can’t remember the appeal of a bigger home.

“It might be just because we thought we wanted it because everyone else does,” she said. “Now people have an opportunity to look at their next home and see that they don’t need that much space, that they can have a better life, and better quality of life, with less.”

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