

New Homes

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A hearty welcome to the flat that looks like a house

What do you see when you gaze upon a row of townhouses? Do you see an affordable form of homeownership? Do you see the low-maintenance lifestyle that Americans are said to crave?

Nah. You see garage doors—whole blocks of white slabs that roll back to reveal gaping maws commodious enough to accommodate a fighter plane.

Of course, this hasn't stopped us from buying townhouses. Consumers apparently have decided that a Cyclops garage door is a small tradeoff in exchange for convenience and simplicity.

But, gee, do they have to look so much alike?

There are signs of change coming, from those 800-pound gorillas of marketing, our beloved aging and affluent Baby Boomers. Increasing numbers of Boomers say they'd like to scale down from their big old single-family houses. But to what?

Many of them say that what would be most pleasing would be a townhouse, condo or apartment that feels a bit like that house they would leave behind.

Thus, "The Big House" is born. It's a concept from a Dallas architecture firm that has found favor around the country. The Big House is characterized, typically, by huge



Photo courtesy of Humphreys & Partners Architects

This apartment house at the Hamptons in Tampa, designed by Humphreys & Partners, has the look of a large single-family home—just like aging Baby Boomers want.

stone chimneys, gables and bay windows. It bears a distinct resemblance to a huge single-family home.

And, yes, many units have garages, though many Big House designs have configured them so that only a couple of garage doors are visible on each side of the structure, causing them to look even more like the big old houses that the target market is moving out of.

Mark Humphreys, whose firm, Humphreys & Partners Architects, came up with the concept, says that he designed his first Big House about two years ago. "It was a little bit by accident," he explains. "Our client had asked for a smaller building instead of a big apartment building, with attached garages." When his staff created the first renderings, "it started to kind of look like a house.

"I said, 'Why don't we make it look like a real house?'" he recalls.

Currently, the Big House is the basic plan in 13 completed developments, with about two dozen under construction and 25 to 30 in the design stage. Each building has 6 to 14 units that average about 1,200 square feet each.

Humphreys says his firm averages two calls a day (including from Mexico and South Africa) from developers and builders who are inquiring about the Big House.

"They call for two reasons," Humphreys says. "One group of callers says, 'We really think that the market has changed, and that people would rather live in something that looks like this than a big institutional-looking, three-story apartment building.'

"The other group that calls says, 'We have a problem getting villages to approve apartment projects, but if we show them a picture of apartments that look like houses, they'll say it's great.'"

The first Big House plans in the Chicago area are about to be constructed in northwest suburban Woodstock, where developer Landmark America plans to build 275 rental units at a complex called Terrace Springs. Most of the Big Houses so far have, indeed, been rentals, but a handful have been for-purchase properties.

Humphreys, whose firm designs houses for subdivisions around the country, says that well-appointed, upscale apartments for "renters by choice" will have a big effect on the designs of single-family homes. Those downsizing Boomers, again.

"A lot of builders are missing the market on downsizing for that buyer: A small closet and an unattractive kitchen and master bath are not going to make it."

And did we mention the garage doors?

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