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COVER STORY

Dreaming BIG

By ROLAND LI

In its most recent report, the American Institute of Architects said that the downturn had caused homeowners to be more frugal, favoring smaller homes. But the shift may not be entirely because of economic conditions.

"The size of homes started getting smaller before the downturn began," said Kermit Baker, AIA's chief economist. "Home sizes don't seem to be picking up."

Although Americans have traditionally associated larger homes with more wealth and greater social status, Baker said that there has been a shift in emphasis from size to usage. Especially as the country's significant baby boomer population ages, concerns about accessibility and convenience are starting to trump desires for gratuitous size and amenities.

The architect Sarah Susanka has even written a successful series of books, beginning with *The Not So Big House*, which popularize the idea of function and quality over size.

The AIA's surveys of residential architecture firms have supported the "less is more" design of homes.

"Owners were happier with less space that was more designed to their individual lifestyles and needs," said Baker. This meant not only a decrease in square footage of homes, but also fewer amenities like fitness rooms, home theaters and guest wings. Not only are leaner homes cheaper to maintain, potential buyers are less likely to be dissuaded by unwanted amenities when the home is put on the market.

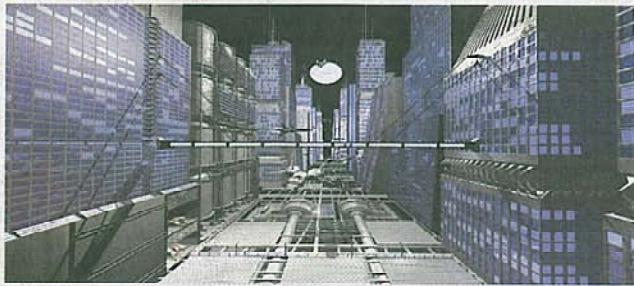
But even amidst the downturn, homeowners have been concerned about certain features, namely energy efficiency and environmental sustainability. No doubt the commercialization of "green" has ingrained the topic in many homeowner's minds, but more energy efficient utilities can lead to very real savings.

The greatest obstacle to adopting new technologies is the initial cost, and without heavy government subsidies, solar panels are unlikely to sprout from every roof.

Particularly futuristic designs are even more distant. Last year, the Wall Street Journal sponsored four designs for new homes, in which architects imagined outlandish homes — one was modeled after a tree, another used fruits and vegetables for insulation and food, while another shifted its walls like a chameleon to match the outside weather. Designs were all meant to be environmentally friendly and energy efficient, with the expectation that new technology would make such designs feasible.

But it's unlikely that such exotic homes, which were designed without considering cost, will become reality in the immediate future.

However, developers, who have more money than private homeowners, are better equipped



to invest in state of the art technology. Generally, energy efficient and sustainable features will pay for themselves after a number of years, but the challenge is the initial investment. With proper financing, developers have the ability to invest and use new technology. Of course, high tech solutions are also fine promotional material when it comes to marketing a new development.

In Battery Park City, a bastion for new luxury buildings, the Albanese Organization has developed a trio of modern green buildings.

The Verdesian, a LEED Platinum rental tower at 211 North End Avenue, incorporates some of the latest technologies, with a natural gas-powered microturbine and solar panels that offset electricity usage. Water and air filtration systems remove particulates and create a healthy environment for residents.

The Visionaire, at 70 Little West Street, has the energy and filtration features, as well as incorporating a wastewater treatment plant, creating 30,000 gallons of water a day and decreasing the building's water usage by 55% compared to buildings of the same size that lack such features. The buildings also have Energy Star-certified appliances and efficient lighting fixtures. The Solaire, the oldest building of the three, was the one of the country's first green residential buildings.

But even the most advanced systems are no good if the tenants and management fail to use them properly. Thus, Albanese focuses on education, as well as technology, informing residents and staff alike about the facility.

"We spend a lot of time training our occupational staff and residents," said Michael Gubbins, director of residential management at the Visionaire.

The Visionaire also incorporates a system that measures the building's kilowatt usage, gas usage, and carbon footprint, allowing for exact calculations of savings, and allowing the mechanical systems to respond accordingly.

U.S. Energy Group created a similar program that controls boilers and hot water systems in buildings. These controls are remotely accessible through a com-

puter, Internet browser or mobile device, allowing users flexibility for access.

"What we're interested in is creating full transparency in a building's energy performance," said David Unger, chief operating officer of U.S. Energy Group.

These systems, based primarily in the New York region, mainly interact with buildings that are heated with steam boilers. Hot water boilers are better, with 97%

combustion efficiency, said Unger, but haven't been widely adopted because of costs. Switching to the hot water boilers would require the replacement of all pipes, a heavy burden. Drastic change would likely occur only if government standards required certain energy efficiency standards.

Until such a sweeping change occurs, building managers and landlords have focused more on doing the best with what they have.

"They're looking for the low-hanging fruit — how can you make your steam system perform more efficiently?" said Unger. He said that proper usage of energy monitoring systems can improve energy efficiency by up to 20%.

As the country's residential market heads deeper into the new decade, economic recovery looks inevitable, but the recession — itself built on a residential real estate bubble — seems to have altered the mindset of homeowners. Combined with broader trends towards smaller homes, this change may stunt the evolution of homes.

"In general, homeowners and home buyers are more conservative now and more cautious about making investments," said Baker of AIA.

With private owners shying away from risks, it will be up to ambitious developers and the government to see that the big ideas of the designers and architects turn into reality.



MICHAEL GUBBINS



DAVID UNGER



The Visionaire in Battery Park City is one of the most technologically advanced residential buildings in the country.