

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Bucking the Trend
In the Land
Of the Large

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

IN 2003, Matt Holley began planning a development of relatively small houses — one of them just 1,800 square feet — in Dallas. His first task was convincing potential lenders that there was a market for the compact dwellings. “Banks,” he said, “like to go with a proven thing.”

And big houses are the proven thing, especially in Texas, where houses of more than 4,000 square feet are common. Mr. Holley did succeed in getting bank financing, and now, the first phase of his development, called Kessler Woods, is nearing completion in the city’s Oak Cliff neighborhood, which is near downtown and consists mostly of modest houses from the 1940’s and 1950’s. Many of them are under 2,000 square feet, and he wanted his houses to blend in — a rare gesture in an era when new houses often loom over their neighbors.

Most of his 13 houses have been sold, Mr. Holley said. And he has just closed on land for a second phase, with an additional 17 houses.

Mr. Holley seems to be benefiting from a renewed interest in modest houses. Young professional couples, he said, look at big houses, and “can’t imagine furnishing, maintaining and using all that space.” He believes there will be more projects like his. “I just happen to have the first one out there,” he said.

Urban Reserve in North Dallas may be second. The houses being planned for that community are mostly 2,000 to 2,500 square feet. The developer, Diane Cheatham, said that she is finding potential buyers very receptive to the smaller-is-better concept.

They don’t, however, always start out thinking that they want a small house. “People walk in the door and they say, ‘We really need a 3,000 square-foot house,’” she said. “As we get into a conversation with them, we



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Matt Holley, developer of Kessler Woods, above, with a home under construction in the Dallas development. The living area, below, of the architect Mil Bodron’s home, which was sold recently.



Photographs by Mark Graham for The New York Times

READY TO MOVE IN

Tammy McNary and Steven Hagler outside their 2,100-square-foot house under construction in Kessler Woods.

say to them, ‘If you think you need 3,000, let’s see what we might be able to do in 2,500, 2,600 square feet.’”

“We take the approach that this is a house built for you, and let’s see if we can make it more efficient,” Ms. Cheatham said. As an environmentalist, she said, she tells clients that if they believe in sustainability, they should consider using fewer resources to build their houses.

“If I didn’t believe that,” she said, “I would be doing ‘big hair houses’” — a reference to the overornamented McMansions that have proliferated around Dallas.

One thing Kessler Woods and Urban Reserve have in common is that both are in a midcentury modernist style. Mr. Holley said that features like sliding glass walls, open floor plans and generous terraces make houses seem bigger than they are. “The indoor space,” he said, “is extended by the possibility of outdoor living.”

At Kessler Woods, he chose architects who share his enthusiasm for modernism — and what could be called modest-ism. One of them, Patrick Hammers, said his own home is 1,500 square feet. Another, Clifford Welch, has a house, from the 1950’s, that is a little over 2,000 square feet. “It is as timeless and useful today as it was when it was built,” he said.

More and more, he said, “I’m finding clients recep-

tive to the idea of houses that are higher in quality, smaller in size.”

Mr. Hammers agreed, saying that clients will agree to build smaller houses if they have all the “bells and whistles.”

Mr. Holley said that, for houses in Kessler Woods, he is able to charge about \$250 a square foot, which he said is more than \$50 above the average per square foot in Dallas. That means that a typical 2,000-square-foot house in the development is \$500,000. “We try to incorporate all the things that will make it, for them, a special house, using less real estate,” he said.

Customers think the houses are worth it.

Tammy McNary and Steven Hagler are about to become the first residents of Kessler Woods — their house, designed by Mr. Welch, will be ready in June.

According to Mr. Hagler, 43, who works for Hewlett-Packard, when he tells people at work that he bought a house, one of the first things they ask is “How big is it?” When he tells them 2,100 square feet, they’re usually surprised.

“Some of those people have built houses that are much larger,” said Ms. McNary, 40. “They wonder, why, if you have an opportunity to build a house, would you build a house that small?”

The answer, Ms. McNary said, is “we want 100 percent of the space in our house to be space we use on a daily basis; we don’t need space for space’s sake.”

Seeing the design has apparently made believers out of some of their friends who are big-house fans. But, she said, “Several of them have been to the site, and they come away impressed.”

While buyers are only starting to appreci-

ate the allure of smaller, well-designed houses, architects have been on the bandwagon for years.

Max Levy, an architect whose work has appeared in a number of national magazines and who generally designs one house at a time, said that he has a waiting list — despite the fact that he is known for talking clients into building smaller houses than they initially request.

Architecturally, he said, “going smaller always results in a better project; it’s always more focused.”

Mr. Levy knows how to make compact houses look substantial, by, for example, distributing rooms around courtyards. That increases the outside dimensions of the house and — as a bonus — gives each room two exposures.

Mr. Levy has sworn off the steroids of American architecture, the synthetic materials like sprayed-on stucco that enable so many houses to grow so big so quickly. Mr. Levy uses stone and plaster, telling clients that quality matters more than quantity.

Mil Bodron, a Dallas architect, sold his 2,100-square-foot house in Highland Park last month — and it wasn’t even on the market. “Someone made me an offer I couldn’t refuse,” Mr. Bodron said. He attributes that to the luxe features he added to the midcentury house, including a brushed-aluminum Bulthaup kitchen, a computerized lighting system and high-end bathroom fixtures.

His philosophy, Mr. Bodron said, is that “you shouldn’t buy a house so big that you can’t afford to do it well.”

“Less space,” he said, “isn’t as much of a problem as bad space.”