

KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

**WILLY KORCHEK '09***Online Editor***A McDonald's Mansion**

The McMansion. One part massive single-family home worth an outlandish sum of money, another part McDonald's, the omnipresent fast food chain seen repeatedly across America. Together, a McDonald's mansion, or McMansion, is an idiom applied to those houses that are similar in appearance, garish in effect, and seen negatively by city planners, environmentalists, and the average neighborhood dweller whose sunlight—and pride of ownership—have been taken away by the new three-story manor next door.

First appearing in the 1980's, McMansions are ever-present today, even in Sherman Oaks and especially around Stansbury Avenue.

Take a 9,830 square foot house on Stansbury. The two story house is placed very close to the sidewalk and was built on spec in 2006 after a smaller, 3,190 square foot Cape Cod style home built in 1946 was demolished. The original house was one story, set back from the street, and sold for \$1,582,500 compared to the new house, which entered the market at \$4,250,000 and was later reduced to \$3,995,000. The new house towers over neighbors on either side.

And then there is the case of three houses in the Sherman Oaks area built together in 2006 on spec on one subdivided lot. The three McMansions are very similar in appearance and are built right on top of one another. The lots, 10,973, 8,833, and 8,002 square feet respectively, are rather small for the size of the three houses, especially in width.

Many groups of houses in the Sherman Oaks area are built by developers on spec and are very similar looking McMansions,

often using the same siding materials.

But the list of McMansions only continues—and the Stansbury area is not the only neighborhood riddled with huge houses on comparatively small lots.

The McMansion Multiplies

According to the United States Census, 1,654,500 single-family houses were built in 2006, the most since 1973. These houses, however, had an average of 2,434 square feet, a nearly 47 percent increase in square footage when compared to 1973's average of 1,660 square feet.

In 1973, 64 percent of all single-family homes had three bedrooms. Only 23 percent had four or more bedrooms. But in 2005, 39 percent of all single-family homes had four bedrooms or more, while 49 percent had three bedrooms. In fact, the percentage of houses with three bedrooms continued to decrease from 1981, but the number of houses with four or more bedrooms started to rise in 1986, around the time of the birth of the McMansion. On the west coast, almost half of all single-family houses had four or more bedrooms in 2005.

Since the conception of the McMansion, worried neighbors have fought to curb the construction of extremely large homes from being built.

One problem occurs even before a McMansion is built: most new homes are built on lots of existing homes that must be torn down. Because these homes can be of a historic style, carry historic significance, or embody neighborhood charm, officials have begun to enact measures slowing the building process and are issuing moratoriums on demolition.

In real estate and developer jargon, a "teardown" is a home that is older and lacks necessary modernizations that a

simple renovation would not make sense. Teardowns have been present as long as homes have been present, but in recent years, they have been targeted as perfect locations for McMansions that hinder neighborhood unity.

Xchange Properties, headquartered in Clarendon Hills, Illinois, makes a business of marketing over 100 teardown properties each year countrywide, including Southern California, and facilitating the selling of the land for redevelopment, in essence brokering teardowns to consumers.

"[Teardown activity] is perceived as smart growth," said Andrei Vorobiev, a founder of the company. "Instead of going out and converting corn fields for housing, in essence we use the land."

Vorobiev said that it is a city's responsibility to set building limits, but what happens to the properties Xchange sells is up to the buyer.

"It's the base of the American constitution: preservation of private property," he said.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation works to preserve historic neighborhoods by promoting legislation to curb teardowns and the development of new McMansions.

"From 19th century Victorian to 1920's bungalows, the architecture of America's historic neighborhoods reflects the character of our communities," said Richard Moe, president, on the National Trust's website (www.nationaltrust.org). "Teardowns radically change the fabric of a community. Without proper safeguards, historic neighborhoods will lose the identities that drew residents to put down roots in the first place."

In a list of 300 communities endangered

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by teardowns compiled by the National Trust, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, Pasadena, Santa Monica, Sherman Oaks, Van Nuys, and other Greater Los Angeles areas were noted individually.

The National Trust views these neighborhoods as “endangered,” and therefore encourages further legislation, but most examples of counteracting laws have proved ineffective.

In Austin, Texas, for example, an ordinance limiting the building of large homes was passed in September 2006 that “prohibits houses more than 2,300 square feet or over 40 percent of their lot size in most central Austin neighborhoods,” according to the *Austin Business Journal*. Since then, however, officials have said that this law will hurt Austin’s economy and land value.

In “A Report of the Economic Impact of the City of Austin’s McMansion Ordinance” filed March 12, 2007, DataSource, an economic consulting firm, found that the measure directly reduces taxes, lessens home values, and harms the building and remodeling industries.

Atlanta has also considered similar legislation, but a four-month moratorium on teardowns was cancelled by the city council in February 2006 after it was found to create a disadvantage to some neighborhoods and was too “exclusive.”

Locally, Manhattan Beach imposed a moratorium on any lot mergers in April to curb the development of huge homes spanning two or three lots. Los Angeles councilmember Tom LaBonge has pushed for a city-wide ordinance to curb mansionization, especially related to square footage to lot size ratios.

“I would hope we could rethink it to allow a person to build their American dream, their castle, and still have them in scale with the neighborhood,” LaBonge told the *Los Angeles Times* in August 2006.

At the Sherman Oaks Neighborhood Council's (SONC) meeting April 9, Tom



Capps was elected to the board after a speech highlighting his views against development and mansionization, explaining that he is a “victim.”

David Rand, a lawyer who serves as the chair of SONC's Land Use Committee (LUC), said that because mansionization is "the most talked about issue" in the Sherman Oaks area, a new subcommittee has been created aimed to recommend ways to control the size of newly built homes.

"I think it's a really topical and pretty divisive issue like it is in a lot of communities across the city. I've been surprised in the motion I've seen out of this issue," he said. "People are really upset about large, oversized box homes being built. It has created a real backlash."

The LUC's mansionization subcommittee recommends ways to "tighten" zoning rules to the city council, which Rand said are "too relaxed."

“A citywide, one-size-fits-all solution is not the best result. This city is so large, so what works for Sherman Oaks won’t work

for San Pedro and won't work for Venice," said Rand. "Each city must tailor its own response to the issue."

The Beauty Bias

More than just alluding to large structures, “McMansion” has come to be a derogatory term when describing homes.

Critics of mansionization point out that deeper connections between a McMansion and McDonald's exist: both are intrusive on quaint neighborhood settings and display architecture that doesn't always fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. Adjectives like "garish" and "ubiquitous" are often paired with McMansion. Traditionally, McMansions have also been thought of as involving little construction expense because they cut corners, often producing aesthetically unpleasing structures.

In an editorial to the *New York Times*, James Fleming, architect, from New York argued that the problem with McMansions is not the size, but rather the appearance: “it

is the design that is the issue in almost every case.”

Perhaps that is why since the 1980's, Beverly Hills' the Design Review Commission evaluates new homes for size, design, and congruity with the rest of the neighborhood. For new homes, the commission created the Residential Design Catalogue to help with choosing a style. Both the review process and the catalogue are the city's efforts to maintain neighborhood unity and prevent overbuilding. The city has even gone so far as to ban the "Persian Palace" style.

Beverly Hills also limits house size to 1,500 square feet plus 40 percent of the lot size square footage, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Pasadena only allows 500 square feet plus 30 percent of the lot size.

Rand said that in Sherman Oaks, only the hillside regions have controlled design limitations, but he does not think that moving to control the “articulation of buildings” is the right direction. Instead, he believes that SONC should stay focused on limiting size.

“I think the hillside is different and unique, but I don’t think a design review component is necessary,” he said. “You [introduce] too much intrusive government action and you’ll get real problems. I think we open up a quagmire if we start dictating design and style.”

In Glendale, two design review boards, which include architects, meet every Thursday to review proposed buildings for "design issues."

The Northwest Glendale Homeowners Association, which created the two boards, also helped pass a zoning ordinance limiting the lot size to home size ratio. The group also works to limit hillside development.

According to Rand, because mansionization is a more prevalent issue in Sherman Oaks than crime, there is something here to be thankful for: “Mansionization in terms of Sherman Oaks is the single most talked about issue. That tells you we live in a pretty good community that lacks crime and a lot of the serious problems that plague other less affluent communities.”



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