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## Curbing the big, the bad, the ugly

Los Angeles is studying citywide limits on the size of houses. Could McMansions become a thing of the past?

By Gayle Pollard-Terry

Times Staff Writer

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As hard as it might be to imagine, new McMansions — those large homes crowding small or average-size lots — could one day become an endangered species in Los Angeles.

City Councilman Tom LaBonge has asked the planning department to come up with citywide guidelines on how big is too big. He is seeking to replace the temporary solutions and current hodgepodge of neighborhood-specific restrictions with an ordinance that applies to all teardowns and to vacant lots on hillsides.

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### FOR THE RECORD:

McMansions: An article in the Aug. 27 Real Estate section about mansionization in Southern California misspelled the last name of Doris Sosin as Sosis. Sosin is the founder of the North of Montana Neighborhood Assn. in Santa Monica. —

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"I would hope we could rethink it to allow a person to build their American dream, their castle," LaBonge said, "and have them in scale with the neighborhood."

He's got plenty of support from people who own one-story houses and prefer not to live in the shadows — literally. They want to preserve the character of their streets by keeping out towering villas that block sunlight, eliminate views, destroy mature trees and create sightlines that invade the privacy of bedrooms and backyards. But there are others who view the construction as an improvement over the small, old houses — some of them decrepit — that the McMansions are replacing. Plus, there are plenty of buyers who want four or more bedrooms.

Nationally, 39% of new homes built last year had four bedrooms, said Steve Melman, director of economic services for the National Assn. of Home Builders. That compares with 23% in 1973, despite the fact that the average American family shrank to 2.6 people from 3.1 in the same period.

"Clearly, new homes continued to get bigger," Melman said.

Consumer demand for more space — a bedroom for every child, a guestroom for the mother-in-law and his-and-her offices — motivates many large remodels and the construction of grand houses in Southern California. Take, for example, the five-bedroom, 4 1/2 -bathroom, 5,300-square-foot Mediterranean that sits on a 7,720-square-foot lot on Dunleer Drive in Cheviot Hills and is listed for \$2.849 million.

Daniel Sidis, a general contractor, built the house on spec after tearing down a 1,520-square-foot, one-story home with three bedrooms and two bathrooms that was built in 1950. The frontyard remains the same size, he said, and the backyard is bigger because the old, U-shaped house

surrounded a patio.

"From a financial point of view," he said, "the lots are too expensive to build small houses."

The mansionization of Southern California first began to attract notice about 20 years ago in Bel-Air, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, Palos Verdes Estates, San Marino and other affluent areas.

Stephen Shapiro, co-owner of Westside Estate Agency, a real estate brokerage firm in Beverly Hills, described how in 1985 dentist Alan Khedari partnered with a savings and loan, snapped up old houses, tore them down and built 15 bigger homes a year in the flats between Santa Monica and Sunset boulevards. Huge bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens and closets became standard.

Grander homes, some as large as 25,000 square feet, were also going up in the hills north of Sunset. That got the attention of the Beverly Hills City Council, which revised existing development standards in 1987 to make sure hillside homes didn't become so large they changed "the scale, integrity or character of the area."

The Los Angeles City Council, in 1988, asked the planning department to study the spread of big houses, Deputy Director Gordon Hamilton said, and subsequently approved setback and side-yard requirements and height restrictions.

### **Setting a ceiling**

The recession of the early '90s slowed mansionization, but the trend picked up again a decade later.

As property values escalated and suitable land became scarce in sought-after neighborhoods, more developers bought teardowns and built jumbo houses on spec. The result: the good, the bad and the ugly, including boxy behemoths built out to property lines and wedding-cake-like creations adorned with oversize columns.

The trend has the potential to "affect many neighborhoods adversely," said Richard Close, president of the Sherman Oaks Homeowners Assn. In his area, he points to large, two-story homes built next to 1950s ranch-style houses.

"They are too large, taking up most of the land, creating privacy issues, creating a permanent shadow," he said. "If you're out in your backyard, you have someone staring at you."

A bigger-is-not-always-better backlash has prompted many cities, among them San Marino, Burbank, Glendale, Rancho Palos Verdes and Westminster, to rein in the size of new houses. And, in a few cases, to arbitrate taste.

Beverly Hills restricts new houses to 1,500 square feet plus 40% of the lot size, said Audrey Arlington, a principal planner for the city. That permits a 4,620-square-foot house on a 7,800-square-foot lot. Plans for houses larger than 15,000 square feet have to go through a different process.

If the proposed design does not meet staff approval, it must go before the city's design review commission, created in 2004. The aesthetics-driven commission ensures that new houses have an architectural style that fits the streetscape.

"What we're trying to do is come to a common understanding for good design," said commissioner Marilyn Weiss, an interior designer.

At a recent meeting, the commissioners gave plenty of direction: In one case, they required the reduction of a front entry from two stories to one; in another case, they eliminated a triumphal arch they considered out of scale. Nothing too busy, bulky, overdone, overbuilt, overwhelming or overbearing got their approval.

"Thank you for no columns," commissioner Eleanor Schrader Schapa told one applicant.

"In an appropriate style such as Georgian style or Classical Revival style, that's fine," said Schapa, who teaches history of design, interior design and architecture at UCLA Extension.

Some oversize houses in Beverly Hills have been derisively called "Persian Palaces," because Iranian homeowners, including many with large families, had them built.

"The reality is the Persians are building very few of them," said commissioner Hamid Gabbay, an Iranian-born architect. Plus, "they're spread all over the city."

They are not, however, all over Pasadena, which allows a maximum floor area of 30% of the lot size plus 500 square feet for construction of single-family homes, said Richard Bruckner, director of planning and development for the city. That restriction has been in place for more than a decade.

Pasadena updated its hillside ordinance about a year ago, limiting the size of a new house to 25% of the lot and taking the slope into consideration for what's buildable land. Another ordinance protects certain mature trees such as oaks and sycamores.

The damage to the tree canopy from new construction disturbs Doris Sosis, founder of the North of Montana Neighborhood Assn. in Santa Monica, an affluent area where smaller houses advertised as teardowns start at \$2 million and streets are lined with large, old sycamore, elm, melaleuca and pine trees that are not protected by ordinance.

"They buy a little house and then they bulldoze the whole thing," Sosis said of lots stripped to make way for large homes.

### **Striking a balance**

In response to mansionization concerns, the maximum for a two-story house in Santa Monica has been set at 35% of the parcel coverage for the first floor, and 26% on the second floor since 1999, said Paul Foley, a principal planner for the city.

Kate Bransfield, an agent with Prudential California Realty, recently sold a two-story Mediterranean, north of Montana Avenue, that had five bedrooms and 4 1/2 bathrooms in 4,459 square feet on a 7,500-square-foot lot, for \$3.25 million. Built in 1992, it replaced a 1,487-square-foot house with three bedrooms and one bath that had been built in 1925, according to the Los Angeles County assessor's office.

Bransfield said she sees nothing wrong with super-sized houses.

"Somebody works hard," she said, "and they want to build a house to their liking."

In places where there are no restrictions, anyone can build up and out on postage-stamp lots, regardless of neighborhood opposition.

"Just because you can do it doesn't mean you should do it," said Lynnette Berg Robe, a member of the Mulholland Scenic Parkway Design Review Board, which recommends to the Los Angeles planning department whether small, steep vacant lots considered unbuildable before technological advances should be developed and what size and house design should replace teardowns on the Laurel Canyon hillside.

Depending on a temporary proposal already on the table, the new tri-level Early California Mission-style house on a corner of North Crescent Heights Boulevard in L.A.'s Beverly Grove area could become the last of its kind in that neighborhood. The four-bedroom, four-bath house — about 4,400 square feet — dominates a lot of less than 6,000 square feet.

The designer, André LaRocca, said he's not throwing up big boxes with columns that look out of place or tearing down the graceful designs of noted architect Paul Williams, for example. It's also cheaper, he said, to build new rather than repair a house with old floors, old walls, old wiring.

He designed two large homes where there once was one. The old house, on a double lot, had three bedrooms and one bath in 1,661 square feet and was built in 1922, according to the county assessor's office.

"It was an old, dilapidated home from the '20s that was an eyesore of the neighborhood," said Rosalie Klein, a real estate agent with Prudential California Realty, John Aaroe Division, Pacific Design Center. She was the listing agent for the new house, which sold in early August for close to the \$2.295 million asking price.

Judy Ross-Bunnage, an agent with Coldwell Banker Beverly Hills South, represented the buyer, who did not respond to a request for an interview. "Most people today want new construction," she said. "This is tasteful. It's light and bright with beautiful finishes and well-proportioned rooms suited to lifestyles that people enjoy today."

Designer LaRocca said he's had no complaints from neighbors. However, other area residents are fed up with the large homes going up on their streets. Their complaints prompted Los Angeles City Councilman Jack Weiss to propose an interim ordinance that would limit the buildable area of a lot to 60% in Beverly Grove.

Similar ordinances, pushed by Councilmen Ed Reyes and LaBonge set restrictions for the Mt. Olympus flattop and Paradise Hill, mountainous areas near Highland Park, and for Hancock Park. Last year, Councilwoman Wendy Greuel got approval for a temporary measure that limits the size of new homes in the Sunland-Tujunga area.

LaBonge, for his part, hasn't decided what's too big. He just wants a more uniform approach. He's leaving the matter to the planning department, which is conducting a neighborhood character study of the entire city and also checking the policies of adjacent communities, including Beverly Hills and Pasadena. He expects the council to consider this issue within nine months.

"Because of the cost, developers think they have to build the biggest castle in the county," LaBonge said. "Los Angeles is a city of great neighborhoods from San Pedro to Chatsworth. What can we do to enhance the balance that needs to take place in the neighborhoods?"

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