



bright idea
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Close quarters from top: XTen Architecture's addition, LeanArch's Kuhlhaus 01 and Taalman Koch's itHouse all illustrate the trend toward smaller houses.

Welcome To Smallville

These days, size does matter. Sam Lubell takes measure of the incredible shrinking house.

Lately the American Dream has been looking a lot smaller. Wallets, of course, have shrunk, and so have cars. Now houses, the very symbol of that dream, are shrinking too.

A survey by the American Institute of Architects reveals that 57 percent of architecture firms reported a decrease in the square footage of their residential projects in 2010 compared with 13 percent back in 2005, when size was still a virtue and a McMansion was considered a good investment. And according to the National Association of Homebuilders, the average house size dropped last year to 2,438 square feet, down more than 100 square feet from 2007.

"We went through a sort of baroque period, with an obsession for moreness," said Alan Koch, a principal at Taalman Koch Architecture in Los Angeles. "I think the hysteria of 'more is better' is really cooling off."

Replacing this moreness is the cult of small. Books like "Tiny Houses" (Rizzoli, 2009), the new edition of "Little House on a Small Planet" (Lyons Press, 2009) and "Small Eco Houses: Living Green in Style" (Universe, 2010) celebrate the beauty of smallness; in magazines, the microhouse has become a standard typology.

Koch and his partner, Linda Taalman, in particular have made a cottage industry out of smallness. Their firm is currently working on more than 10 of its prefabricated itHouses around California (average living space size: about 1,000 square feet). The houses are built using recycled materials and feature solar panels, but their most earth-friendly aspect is the footprint, which sets limits on construction materials and energy use. (Koch and Taalman's own itHouse, near Joshua Tree, cost about \$265,000 to build.) And according to Koch, the intimate scale helps to bring owners closer to nature — if not to one another — and forces them to pare down to the essentials.

"It gives you a chance to make a new start," said Koch, who also sees a new focus on the quality rather than the size of spaces. Another



Small is beautiful A 1,500-square-foot house in Nagoya, Japan, by Architecture W.



of his projects, for the artist Uta Barth in the Mar Vista neighborhood of Los Angeles, started out as an addition to Barth's 1,200-square-foot house but was trimmed down to just a renovation. "We kept paring it back, saying, 'Why do we need that? Does this really need to be there?' We thought, Instead of spending money on square footage, why don't we just spend money on a nicer floor?"

Dirk Denison, a Chicago architect who specializes in large luxury houses, recently worked on the renovation of a 2,200-square-foot house in Carmel, Calif. The owners, Kathy and Gary Bang, had downsized from four houses — including a 5,000-square-foot dwelling near Asheville, N.C., with a 1,100-square-foot guesthouse — to just one, which Denison reimagined with a large central courtyard and spaces that flow into one another. Now every room is used on a regular basis (rarely the case with their previous houses). "It's very freeing to live with a lot less stuff," said Kathy, who still can't seem to believe that she owns only one set of flatware.

In cities where real estate is scarce, "less is more" is the only way to go. In the California cities of Manhattan Beach and Hermosa Beach, for example, ultrasmall lots pose a challenge to even the most creative architects. Houses of between 1,600 and 1,800 feet by architects like Dean Nota, Make Architects, LeanArch and XTen Architecture all feature multi-use living spaces on the top floors, large windows and wide balconies to maximize views, direct sunlight and the illusion of space.

Indeed, Duo Dickinson, a Connecticut architect who has written several books on small houses and designs them as well, said the best small houses share the same basic

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ingredients: interconnecting axes and vistas, high ceilings, a connection between inside and out, and density of storage. A case in point: the 1,300-square-foot renovation and addition by the San Francisco firm Apparatus in that city's Glen Park neighborhood, on a corner lot that is only 13.5 feet wide. In order to make the best use of the space, the architects left the interior roof exposed and created rooms that serve multiple functions: the kitchen and dining room double as hallways, and the master bathroom also serves as a laundry room.

The Portland, Ore., architects Brian White and Michel Weenick of Architecture W recently built a 1,500-square-foot house in Nagoya, Japan, where multi-use rooms are the cultural norm. The kitchen functions as a dining room, and the living room is designed with sliding doors that can close off a guest bedroom with a Murphy bed. There is also a 650-square-foot apartment below for the in-laws.

Stuart Hill, the principal architect at Apparatus, sees his clients going smaller not just to save money but also to save face. "In

the '90s all my clients were driving Land Rovers, and now they all have Priuses," he said. "They don't want to be at the carpool line at their school with what's perceived as a gas guzzler. It's the same with houses." But size, of course, is relative. Two thousand square feet seems modest until you compare it to Path Architecture's prototype for an off-the-grid prefab house called the Roho, which at about 200 square feet is smaller than your average garage. A glass wall and double-height ceiling make the living space feel larger than it is.

A new development outside of Austin, Tex., called Agave has enlisted several local architecture firms to create what is billed as "the largest collection of modern designed homes in the nation." (So far 130 houses have been built; plans call for 460 more.) Here, the average house size is about 1,600 square feet; the smallest is around 1,200. Open-plan designs put a premium on public spaces, and bedrooms are often smaller because "people really tend to just sleep in bedrooms," said the project coordinator Chris Czichos, echoing the wisdom of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Usonian houses allotted minimal space to bedrooms and bathrooms. Rick and Cindy Black, who have 12 houses in Agave, set a precedent back in 2005 with the design of their own 1,100-square-foot home, a series of lofty cubes near the University of Texas. The house, Rick said, "generated some buzz because it was pretty exceptional in Texas at the time." Still, he sees the return to smaller living spaces as nothing new: "In the '50s, four people lived in a 1,000-square-foot home pretty often. Standards have changed. We've got more stuff now." ■

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