

Opinions vary when applying the 'McMansion' label

Q: What is a "speculative infill" home? Is it the same as what people refer to as a "McMansion"? If so, what is your personal opinion as a builder on this issue?

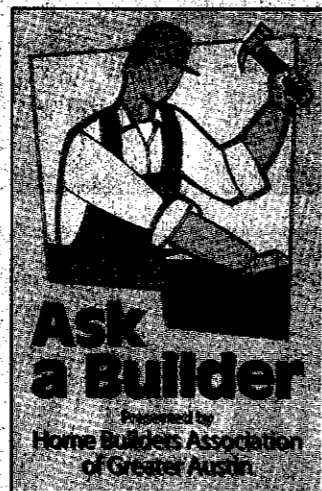
A: Briefly, the term "speculative" infill means two things:

■ **Speculative** — the home is built "for the market" with no actual client contracted for its eventual purchase.

■ **Infill** — the home is built in the inner core of the city, most likely on a site where a previous structure was removed.

There is no official definition of what a "McMansion" is. What one new home buyer loves another will despise. So, is a McMansion defined strictly a square footage issue? Is it style? Is it location? And can you legislate taste? That answer varies across the country.

Last year, Austin's city council began discussions



about limiting the size of homes built in within a core boundary of the city's limits.

This was all done under auspices of "drainage concerns" but the real issue was about the size of new homes being built in place of older ones. Quickly the term "McMansion" arose from the media blitz that surrounded this issue, and the "McMansion Ordinance" was eventually passed after heated discussions between

property owners, builders, neighborhood groups and city officials.

I can see why someone decided to use the term "McMansion" to describe the large new homes replacing dilapidated cottages in Tarrytown, Pemberton Heights and Clarksville to name a few. "McMansion" is a word that, to me, evokes a negative connotation and implies excessive consumption on the part of its homeowner. I won't go into what size home today's homeowners should have but I can say with certainty that many want a four-bedroom, 3½-bathroom house with a large kitchen, formal dining room, game room, at least a two-car garage and plenty of storage.

This adds up to about 4,500 square feet of building area, but usually ends up being more once other rooms are added, such as home offices, guest suites, media rooms, mud rooms,

etc.

"McMansion" also implies mass production, with the fast food reference, but this is definitely not the case with Austin homes being built "inside the loop" because of the need for one-of-a-kind home designs.

These unique designs are needed for a number of reasons that include differing lot sizes and setbacks, placement of existing trees, topography, etc. More often than not, homes built in Central Austin are designed by licensed architects and tend to be more contemporary than any other design style.

When building a new home, a traditional guideline is that cost of the finished lot (with utilities available, etc.) should run about 25 percent to 30 percent of the total package, house and land. Land costs in Austin have increased tremendously over the past several years, which natu-

rally resulted in an increase in the price of a finished home. I've personally seen the percentage of a home's lot price to its overall sales price change from about 30 percent in 2002 to about 50 percent in 2007. Now that the size of finished homes is dramatically limited by the ordinance, fewer projects are being started because it no longer makes financial sense. You need to be able to build a large enough home to justify the lot cost.

My opinion is that the term "McMansion" was misapplied to Austin's infill construction movement. The term unfortunately stuck and now "McMansion" means just about any home built "inside the loop" in Austin, because almost always the home being replaced is much smaller than the new residence.

In my assessment, the only way a home can escape being judged a "McMansion" is for the home to be

designed and constructed for the end user with special needs and the support of the immediate neighbors.

Our expert: Marshall Durrett of Durrett Interests, LLC, mdurrett@durrettinterests.com, durrettinterests.com.

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