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McMansions: The Extent and Regulation of Super-sized Houses

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ABSTRACT *In response to the increase in oversized houses and plats, this paper reports the results of a survey of 103 US cities about the presence and extent of McMansion houses (infill and greenfield plats) and on their approaches to regulation. With a response rate of 57%, the results revealed that many cities have McMansions and some have adopted regulations (such as limiting building height, design review, and limiting floor area ratio) to control their development. As McMansions continue to spread, communities may need to consider more effective mechanisms to control for undesirable impacts—for infills on neighbours, and for greenfield plats on sprawl.*

On ... a small road ... four major construction projects are under way on individual lots. In each case, the existing, one-story home was sold and pulled down. A builder is now constructing a massive mansion some ten times larger than the pre-existing building on each lot ... These large land-use changes in such a small area have significant effects on the town as a whole ... tens of trees have been removed to make way for not only the massive buildings but also for the vast sprinkled lawns that surround them. Large decorative lawns and small clusters of shrubs is very different from the slightly overgrown woods ... They also mean fertilizer, weed-killer, other chemical products ... These changes of vegetation, and the increase in built area, alter both the flora and fauna of the area, especially when introduced on such a massive scale—not one mansion, but four and possibly five on the same small street!

Second, when a new subdivision of million dollar plus homes is proposed, community members may have an opinion on the uncontrolled removal of smaller, more affordable homes for the young and/or the old members of our community.

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And finally, whatever your architectural tastes, no one can pretend that these homes are adding to the beauty of our town.

But none of these objections would be meaningful if neighbourhood residents had been consulted, as we imagine they would have been if an entire new subdivision was proposed . . . By tearing down individual homes and replacing them, builders and realtors seem able to sidestep any conventional public approvals process. Only those of us who live nearby are aware that our neighbourhood is changing radically. (Letter to the editor, *Carlisle Mosquito*, 8 June 2002, John and Jacqueline Zeisel)

Introduction

This paper examines McMansions in the form of oversized infill houses and plats of greenfield oversized houses. It considers the extent of these types of development and local government regulations of them, as well as the types of controls local governments have adopted for these developments.

While fast food chains may be getting rid of the super-sized menus, American homebuilders continue to build extra large houses to meet buyers' demands. A study by the National Association of Home Builders (2002) found growing house sizes in the United States. In 1987 the average new home had 1900 square feet; by 2001 this had grown to an average of 2300 square feet. While the average house size has grown by more than 20%, the percentage of new houses with more than 3000 square feet has almost doubled (US Census, 2003). In 1988, 11% of new houses constructed had more than 3000 square feet. By 2003, this number had grown to 20%. As an example, Pulte Homes reports that the company is adding 150 to 200 square feet to its average new house every few years (Knack, 1999).

As house sizes have increased, household and lot sizes have decreased. The average household size dropped from 3.14 in 1970 to 2.57 in 2000 (Fields, 2003). Thus, the average square footage of home per person has increased. The average lot size dropped 6.5% to 16 454 square feet from 1987 to 2002 (NAHB, 2002). Larger houses and smaller lots are not necessarily bad. Smaller lots can save costs in infrastructure and encourage more efficient use of land. McMansions have gone international, from Australia to England (O'Brian, 2004; *The Independent*, 2006).



Figure 1. Views of an infill oversized house before (similar to other houses in the area) and after the owner super-sized it. The new house (right) combined two houses, added two storeys and changed the style. *Source:* Photos: Franklin County Auditor's Office and Jack L. Nasar.



Figure 2. Greenfield plat of oversized houses. Source: Photo Jack L. Nasar.

Even, China has joined in with a McMansion development called Orange County, China (Glick, 2006), designed by Los Angeles architects.

In considering oversized houses, this paper distinguishes between two forms of such development: infill and greenfield plats. In the infill case (Figure 1), someone builds an oversized house—one that is larger than and covering more lot area than the existing older homes nearby—or tears down a house and builds a new oversized house in a built up area. Greenfield or ‘tract mansions’ (Figure 2) are “a plat of large expensive houses . . . on speculation” (Hayden, 2004, p. 110). For example, in Issaquah, Washington the city is overwhelmed with subdivisions with \$500 000 homes (*The Economist*, 1999). Proponents of Smart Growth advocate more compact developments, in part to conserve resources—road-lane miles, public service and housing occupancy costs—incurred by sprawl (Burchell *et al.*, 2000; Alexander & Tomalty, 2002; Burchell, & Mukherji, 2003). Infill oversized houses might reduce sprawl and help revitalize inner-ring suburbs, by allowing rebuilding in already settled areas, but greenfield plats have the opposite effects.

Infill McMansions (additions, tear-downs or a new house on a vacant lot) raise a different problem: compatibility. In older neighbourhoods, the tear-down alone can threaten the historic character, which residents want to protect. Complaints often come from neighbouring residents, who lobby their local government to adopt regulations to prevent or minimize the negative effects of these tear-downs, infills and expansions.

Defining the McMansion

Writers have given McMansions different labels, such as monster houses, starter castles, tract mansions, mega homes and garage Mahals. Infill McMansions are what Kending (2004) refers to as the ‘Too-Big-House’, “too big for the lot on which it sits” and “out of scale with the rest of the community” (p. 47). *The Word Spy* (2004) agrees, defining a McMansion as “a large opulent house, especially a new house that has a size and style that doesn’t fit in with the surrounding houses”. Ada Louie Huxtable (1997) calls them “grotesquely grandiose” (p. 68).

The research for the current paper focused on large (3000 square feet or larger) infill houses (or additions) built in existing smaller house neighbourhoods and on greenfield plats. The perception of an oversized house relates to its lot and context, but relative size was too difficult to readily obtain via a survey. Instead, 3000 square feet was used as a minimum. That size is larger than 80% of US houses and 30% larger than the average (2300 square feet) new house in the US (US Census, 2000).

Literature Review

The academic literature has had little to say about McMansions, and the professional literature has only a few articles on their pros and cons. Most articles on McMansions have appeared in newspapers and magazines describing the phenomenon and the regulatory approaches taken by cities.

Some see infill McMansions as a benefit. In spite of problems with scale and compatibility, they argue that infill development fits with Smart Growth strategies (Burchell *et al.*, 2000). It uses existing infrastructure, reduces sprawl, revitalizes suburbs, promotes reinvestment in older suburbs and replaces obsolete housing (Lang & Danielson, 2002; Nasser, 2002). McMansions may meet the demands of some homebuyers, who would like to get the features of new homes in established neighbourhoods close to the central city. According to Lang & Danielson (2002), "this new 'super-sized American dream' includes fully loaded SUVs and, yes, monster houses" (p. 56). The McMansion is not just a place to live, but an assertion of the American sense of identity and space making a clear statement of prosperity (Szegedy-Maszak, 2004).

However, greenfield McMansion plats run counter to Smart Growth goals, even if, according to one study, less compact development may be associated with more affordable housing (Alexander & Tomalty, 2002). Furthermore, infill McMansions may increase property values and make their communities less affordable. Given the relatively small portion of the population that can afford a McMansion, opponents want cities to focus on providing affordable housing for the typical resident. Some codes restricting McMansions have yielded more affordable houses (Hinshaw, 2002). According to Hinshaw (2002, p. 27), "inflicting massively over-sized structures on neighbourhoods that have an established pattern of small houses on small lots is the epitome of public rudeness ... Communities should not be catering to this kind of nouveau riche excess".

People have proposed different regulatory approaches. For example, the Governor of New Jersey proposed a McMansion 1% tax on the homebuyer for newly constructed homes valued at \$1 million or more (Diskin, 2004). However, most of the regulatory response is occurring at the local level. Hinshaw (2002, p. 27) calls for carefully crafted standards that benefit everyone, "not just the newcomers", standards (such as FAR (Floor area ration) of 0.5 or design review) that without discouraging infill development encourage compatible development.

Szold (2005) studied three cities with McMansions and found that the cities created regulations in reaction to the construction of McMansions. They put regulations in place to help combat fears about effects on property values and neighbourhood design. The three cities used various approaches including floor area ratios, impervious surface coverage, lot coverage, height limitations, daylight plane regulations, setbacks and design review. Szold did not address reasons for the reluctance of planners to make stricter regulations, but did recognize the need

to balance “concerns about the neighbourhood impact with private property rights” (p. 189).

Homeowners may complain that restrictions on the size of the development on their private property represent a restriction on property rights or a taking, but US law gives local communities the right to control oversized houses. *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* (1926) gave communities the right to control land-use, and the court has continued to expand that police power (Meck & Pearlman, 2004). The courts have upheld the public purpose of uniform neighbourhood appearance or aesthetics as “a legitimate government purpose in land use regulation” (Mandelker, 1993, p. 458). In *Berman v. Parker* (1954) the US Supreme Court noted that the legislature had the power “to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy” (p. 22). In *Penn Central v. New York City* (1978) the Court empowered cities to enact restrictions or controls to enhance quality of life by preserving the character and desirable aesthetic features of a city. State courts have echoed those decisions (Smardon & Karp, 1993). Regulations must fit a valid public purpose. Controlling oversized houses which can impact sound, traffic, light and aesthetics fits well within that public purpose.

A study of Smart Growth regulations in the state of Illinois found that few local governments had low levels of policies and often had regulations that opposed Smart Growth (Talen & Knaap, 2003). In relation to McMansions, few cities had policies for infill development, and they had “minimum lot size requirements nearly triple what they could be, setbacks double what they could be” (Talen & Knaap, 2003, p. 357). Rather than restricting sprawl, these regulations required it!

A review of newspaper articles from major newspapers, between 1998 and 2004 for the current study found that 40 communities had adopted policies for McMansions, while another 33 had considered adopting regulations. Table 1 shows the communities, types of regulation and dates. The newspaper scan found that 14 states had considered some form of regulation. Most reports centred on cities on the east or west coasts (New York 24.7%, California and Connecticut, 12.3% each, New Jersey 11%, Massachusetts, 6.8%) or near major cities, such as New York, Chicago or Washington DC. Communities used various methods to regulate McMansions. Most of them relied on simple adjustments to existing zoning regulations. 31.5% controlled house size, 17.3% controlled lot coverage, and 11% (all in Connecticut) required a special permit. Other controls included design review (6.9%), height controls (5.5%), a moratorium (5.5%), lot size, daylight plane, building regulations, demolition limit and an overlay zone.

Some communities have found the development pressure so intense that they require a building moratorium. For example, in 1999, Eastchester, New York imposed a building moratorium to give the community time to revise its zoning code to address McMansion development (Foderaro, 2001).

Some communities, such as Demarest, New Jersey, set a maximum size for houses in residential zoning districts. Others, such as, Los Altos, California, reduced the maximum lot coverage. Southborough, Massachusetts limited gross floor area. Others, such Stanwood, Washington, adopted bulk regulations. Pasadena, California is an example of a city requiring daylight plane regulations for McMansions; and communities, such as Sunnyvale, require design review for new homes when they exceed a specified floor area ratio.

In a different approach, some communities have attempted to make it more difficult to tear down existing houses. However, Charles Crook the planning

Table 1. Cities that have considered or adopted McMansion regulations based on newspaper scans

City	State	Adopted	Considered adoption	When	Type of regulation
Burlingame	CA	X		1999 or before	Design Review
Los Altos	CA	X		1999 or before	Lot Coverage
Menlo Park	CA	X		1999 or before	Notification Requirement
Northbrook	CA		X	2003	House Size
Palo Alto	CA	X		1999 or before	Height Limit
Pasadena	CA	X		1991	Plane Regulations
Portola Valley	CA	X		1999 or before	Moratorium
San Jose	CA		X	1999	House Size
Woodside	CA	X		1999 or before	Design Review
Denver	CO	X		2003	House Size
Littleton	CO		X	1999	Lot Size
Chester	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Deep River	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
East Haddam	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Essex	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Haddam	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Lyme	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Old Lyme	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Old Saybrook	CT		X	2003	Special Permit
Willington	CT		X	2003	House Size
Cocoa Beach	FL	X		2002	Height Limit
Cocoanut Grove Village	FL		X	2002	Overlay
Tampa	FL		X	2002	House Size
Treasure Island	FL	X		2002	Referendum
Atlanta	GA		X	2003	Demolition Limit
Glen Ellyn	IL	X		Unknown	Lot Coverage
Glencoe	IL	X		2000	Plane Regulations
Hinsdale	IL	X		2000 or before	Unknown
Lake Forest	IL	X		1989	House Size
Naperville	IL	X		2002 or before	Design Review
Harahan	LA	X		2000 or before	Unknown
Duxbury	MA		X	2002	Lot Coverage
Grotton	MA		X	2002	Historic Regulations
Newton	MA	X		Unknown	Unknown
Southborough	MA		X	2001	House Size
West Gloucester	MA	X		2001	Overlay Zone
Birmingham	MI		X	2000	Lot Coverage
Rochester	MI			2000	Moratorium
Bedminster Township	NJ	X		2001	Lot Size
Cresskill	NJ	X		2002 or before	Lot Coverage
Demarest	NJ	X		1996	House Size
East Amwell	NJ		X	2001	Downzoning
Greenwich	NJ	X		1998	House Size
Madison	NJ		X	2001	Lot Coverage
Middletown	NJ	X		2000	Unknown
Mountain Lakes	NJ	X		Unknown	Lot Coverage
Bronxville	NY		X	2003	Moratorium
Eastchester	NY	X		1999	House Size

Table 1. *continued*

City	State	Adopted	Considered adoption	When	Type of regulation
Glen Cove	NY	X		2002	House Size
Greenburgh	NY	X		2002	House Size
Larchmont	NY	X		2002	Moratorium
Mamaroneck	NY	X		Unknown	House Size
New Canaan	NY		X	1998	Height Limit
North Castle Township	NY		X	2001	House Size
North Hempstead	NY	X		1999	House Size
Ossining	NY		X	2002	Bulk Requirements
Pellham Manor	NY	X		Unknown	Lot Coverage
Philipstown	NY		X	2002	Unknown
Rockland	NY		X	2003	Building Size
Rye	NY	X		2003	Building Size
Scarsdale	NY	X		Unknown	Design Review
Southampton	NY		X	1998	House Size
Westport	NY		X	2000	House Size
White Plains	NY	X		Unknown	Unknown
Montgomery	OH		X	2003	Demolition Limit
Dallas	TX	X		Unknown	Design Standards
Arlington	VA	X		1998	Height Limit
Closter	VA		X	2001	House Size
Montgomery	VA		X	1998	House Size
Williamsburg	VA		X	2001	Lot Coverage
Hunts Point	WA	X		1992	House Size
Shoreline	WA	X		2002 or before	House Size
Stanwood	WA	X		1990	Bulk Regulations

director of Lake Forest, Illinois said he does not believe cities want the ability to say no to tear-downs (Knack, 1999). He says that some homes deserve to be torn down. Instead he believes that controls should focus on what replaces those tear-downs. Citizens in one community, Montclair, New Jersey created a website that tracks tear-downs and new construction in order to raise awareness of the teardown issue (Kelley, 2006).

In summary, the newspaper articles and professional literature touch on the extent of McMansions, the variety of regulatory approaches available to control them and the possible absence of controls. The current paper sought to provide a more systematic review of the extent of these kinds of developments, the degree, and the kinds of regulations adopted.

Methodology

Currently, the data on McMansion regulation is largely anecdotal. To gain an understanding of both the extent to which US cities have McMansions and the types of regulations used by local governments in response, two different samples of local government officials were contacted by email, website or mail: (1) a sample of the 50 largest cities, and (2) a snowball sample (described below) of communities with McMansions.

The aforementioned review of newspaper reports reveals that cities across the country have McMansions and have considered regulating McMansions.

Although many of the reports come from the coasts and places near large cities, this pattern may result in part from the size of the newspapers. The present study had intended first to select cities from demographics gleaned from the newspaper reports (age in housing, median household income and population), but the cities varied on all of these measures. This led us to sample the two different groups.

For the first, the 50 largest cities in the United States were surveyed based on the 2000 US Census. From this sample, it was hoped to reveal the extent of each type of McMansion development in the largest cities in the United States.

It was assumed that most of these cities would not have McMansion developments. To learn more about the use and type of regulations, a sample of communities with McMansions was needed. For that a snowball sampling approach was used. When it is not possible to create a list of the population with desired sample characteristic (in this case, communities that have McMansions), a non-probability sample (convenience, judgment, quota, or snowball sample) must be used. Convenience samples are selected for their ease of contact (for example, communities nearby the researcher). A judgement sample uses an area which the researcher picks as representative (in this case, communities with McMansions) and draws a sample of participants from that area. Quota sampling requires the researcher to first identify strata and their proportions in the population, and then sample respondents from each stratum. None of these would get as good a sample as would a snowball sample. A snowball sample uses referrals from initial respondents to get new respondents, who in turn identify new respondents. Because it was not possible to compile a list of communities with McMansions to sample at random, snowball sampling was used as a practical alternative.

The survey of the largest cities had a question asking for a list of other cities in their metropolitan area that may have McMansions. Those referrals became contacts in the snowball sample. The survey of those contacts also had a question asking for referrals to other communities in their metropolitan area with McMansions. If a city did not respond, the survey was re-mailed up to three times. (It was decided not to contact communities identified in the scan of newspapers, unless recommended by another community, because such communities might represent a selective group. Perhaps they appeared in papers because they were controversial or 'news worthy', while other communities that did not cause a stir, were overlooked.) Lacking a list of all communities with McMansions, it is not possible to draw a random sample of such communities. As a non-representative sample, a snowball sample may have biases and may not represent a cross-section from the population of interest, but it does give a tentative sense of the extent and types of regulations used. Table 2 lists the cities contacted through the snowball sample.

The survey asked respondents for the number of oversized infill houses and the number of plats. The infill oversized houses included those on an empty lot, or for existing houses, additions or tear-down and replacement with an oversized house. The survey also asked for the types of controls the city was using to deal with them, and their sense of the success of their approach.

The survey of the 50 largest American cities had a 58% response rate ($n = 29$). The snowball sample of recommended communities yielded 53 other communities. A survey sent to each of them had a 56% response rate ($n = 30$).

The survey asked each community to provide a copy of their McMansion regulations, if one is in place. Of the 24 with regulations, 19 of the regulations were obtained for analysis.

Table 2. Communities contacted

50 largest US cities	53 Recommended cities
Albuquerque	NM Arlington, MA
Atlanta, GA	Arlington Heights, IL
Austin, TX	Baltimore County, MD
Baltimore, MD	Belmont, CA
Boston, MA	Bexley, OH
Charlotte, NC	Birmingham, MI
Chicago, IL	Brookline, MA
Cleveland, OH	Bucks County, PA
Colorado Springs, CO	Chester County, PA
Columbus, OH	Cosa Mesa, CA
Dallas, TX	Dana Point, CA
Denver, CO	Del Mar, CA
Detroit, MI	Delaware County, PA
El Paso, TX	Dublin, OH
Fort Worth, TX	Easton, CT
Fresno, CA	Encenidas, CA
Honolulu, HA	Fairfield, CT
Houston, TX	Highland Park, TX
Indianapolis, IN	Hinsdale, IL
Jacksonville, FL	Huntington Beach, CA
Kansas City, MO	Ladera Heights, CA
Las Vegas, NV	Ladue, MO
Long Beach, CA	Laguna Beach, CA
Los Angeles, CA	Lexington, MA
Memphis, TN	Maryland Heights, MO
Mesa, AZ	McKinney, TX
Miami, FL	Montgomery County, PA
Milwaukee, WI	Naperville, IL
Minneapolis, MN	Needham, MA
Nashville-Davidson, TN	New Albany, OH
New Orleans, LA	Newport Beach, CA
New York, NY	New Rochelle, NY
Oakland, CA	Newton, MA
Oklahoma City, OK	Palo Alto, CA
Omaha, NE	Plano, TX
Philadelphia, PA	Plymouth, MI
Phoenix, AZ	Powell, OH
Portland, OR	Redondo Beach, CA
Sacramento, CA	Richardson, TX
St. Louis, MO	Rochester, MI
San Antonio, TX	Rutherford, TN
San Diego, CA	San Carlos, CA
San Francisco, CA	San Clemente, CA
San Jose, CA	Scarsdale, NY
Seattle, WA	Seal Beach, CA
Tucson, AZ	Shelton, CT
Tulsa, OK	Troy, MI
VA Beach, VA	University City, MO
Washington, DC	University Park, TX
Wichita, KS	Webster Groves, MO
	Wellesley, MA
	Weston, FL
	Wilmette Village, IL

Table 3. Percentage of cities reporting various amounts of oversized houses and plats reported

	Oversized houses in:		Oversized housing plats in:	
	50 largest cities (<i>n</i> = 29)	Recommended cities (<i>n</i> = 30)	50 largest cities (<i>n</i> = 29)	Recommended cities (<i>n</i> = 30)
Number reported				
0	33.3%	22.2%	37.5%	28.6%
1–5	4.2	11.1	16.7	39.3
6–10	25.0	14.8	20.8	14.3
11–20	8.3	7.4	0.0	3.6
21–30	8.3	22.2	8.3	0.0
30+	20.8	22.2	16.7	14.3
Median no.	5 to 10	11 to 20	1 to 5	1 to 5

Survey Results

Most of the 50 largest cities reported some level of McMansion development during 2003. Table 3 shows the results for the 50 largest cities and the recommended cities. Most of those responding reported more than five oversized houses (62.4% and 66.6% respectively), and many reporting more than 20 such houses (29.1% and 44.4% respectively). For oversized plats, in comparison to oversized houses, fewer cities reported having more than five such plats (45.8% and 32.3%, respectively), with some reporting more than 20 such plats (25% and 14.3% respectively).

The recommended cities had more oversized houses (rank sum = 731) than did the 50 largest ones (rank sum = 647) at a statistically significant level (Mann Whitney U = 347, 1df, $p < 0.05$); but no statistically significant difference emerged across the two samples in the number of oversized housing plats, new regulations, or changed regulations.

With regard to regulations, most communities reporting oversized houses or plats did not adopt or adjust regulations to deal with them. Because most cities with one type of development also had the other, the analysis could not separate those reporting new regulations for plats from those reporting new regulations for oversized infill houses. In each sample, many of the cities with either type of development reported that they had either adopted new regulations (38.9% of 50 largest cities; 48.8% of recommended cities) or adjusted existing regulation (27.0%, and 36.0% respectively) in the past 10 years. Those adopting new regulations and those adjusting regulations had substantial overlap with most communities that adjusted their regulations also adopting new regulations; and most communities adopting new regulations also adjusting their regulations. Table 4 shows the specific controls adopted. Few cities had any one control, although more of them reported using building height limits, design review, floor area ratios and bulk and mass controls. Modifications included controls for lot coverage, increased parking, open space, overlay districts and zero lot lines.

In response to why people built McMansions in their community, most planners responding ($n = 42$) mentioned increased land values (69.0%). Fewer mentioned, lack of building sites (26.2%), desirable character, lifestyle or status (21.4%), and desirable for location, schools and services (19.0%). Fewer than 10%

Table 4. Controls that cities reported adopting

Control	Largest cities (<i>n</i> = 29)	Recommended cities (<i>n</i> = 30)	All cities (<i>n</i> = 59)
Limit building height	8%	18.9%	13.6%
Design Review	6	9.4	7.8
Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	6	7.5	6.8
Make bulk and mass fit neighbours	2	9.4	5.9
Increased front yard setback	2	5.7	3.9
Floor Area Limit (FAL)	0	7.5	3.9
Privacy protections	2	3.8	2.9
Gross Floor Area (GFA)	0	3.8	1.9
Increased back yard setback	2	1.9	1.9
Increase side yard setback	2	1.9	1.9
Daylight plane requirements	2	1.9	1.9
Other (Please describe)	8	18.9	13.6 ^a

Note: ^aOther included lot coverage, increased parking, open space, overlay/conservation district, and zero lot line. Tallies for these were obtained using the same procedure used for classifying reasons reported for these kinds of development.

mentioned demand for in-town housing, insufficient zoning or low interest loans. Two of the authors first set up a list of seven categories fitting the responses, and then independently classified each comment into one or more categories that it fit. We checked with one another for agreement. In each case the comment cited a specific word mentioned in the category. For example, increased land value included words such as land economics, market demand, expand to equal price paid or land value, demand.

The recommended communities (mean population, 41 806, SD 40 253, excluding five counties, each with populations greater than 550 000) have various attributes beyond those listed that might attract new development. Some, such as Wellesley or Lexington, MA, had historic character; others, such as Brookline, MA, are inner ring suburbs; others, such as Newport Beach, CA, are beach or resort cities; and still others have other characteristics. Boomburbs, according to The Fannie Mae Foundation (Lang & Simmons, 2001; Lang, 2004), are 53 sprawling new cities around the edge of a metropolis. They have more than 100 000 residents, have maintained double-digit rates of population growth in each recent decade, but are not the largest city in the metropolitan area. Communities, such as Plano, TX, fit into the boomburb category. Edge cities, according to Garreau (1991), must have more than 5 million square feet (465 000 square metres) of office space, more than 600 000 square feet (5600 square metres) of retail space, more jobs than bedrooms, it must be perceived by the population as one place, and it must have been nothing like a city 30 years earlier. Communities, such as Naperville, IL, fit into the edge city category. Most communities (71.7%) fit into the historic category, often having a historic district, followed by inner-ring suburbs (26.4%), beach towns (13.2%), boomburbs (11.3%), resorts (7.6%) and edge cities (5.7%). The percentages rest on a broader list of boomburbs than Lang's (2004), which has only Naperville and Costa Mesa, and of edge cities than Garreau's (1991) which only lists Naperville. Boomburbs and edge cities would be more likely to have greenfield plats of oversized houses than infill oversized houses, as shown in Table 5. Most of the communities in the other categories also tended to be historic (inner ring, 78.6% historic; beach, 57.1% historic; resort, 75% historic; edge city,

Table 5. Some characteristics of the snowball communities

City	State	Regulate	% of homes built pre-1950	Median home value	McMansion community Median household income (MHI)	% of its metropolitan area (MHI)
Belmont	CA	Yes	14	\$581 800	\$80 631	130
Costa Mesa	CA	Yes	5	\$273 100	55 456	121
Dana Point	CA	Yes	2	\$365 400	62 887	137
Huntington Beach	CA	No	2	\$189 940	64 723	141
Ladera Heights	CA	Yes	9	\$429 400	90 429	197
Laguna Beach	CA	Yes	31	\$639 900	75 740	165
San Clemente	CA	Yes	5	\$372 400	63 346	138
Seal Beach	CA	No	10	\$134 100	42 231	92
Colorado Springs	CO	Yes	11	\$143 300	44 970	96
Naperville	IL	Yes	4	\$248 200	38 795	76
Wilmette Village	IL	Yes	45	\$424 800	106 686	209
Arlington	MA	No	52	\$283 800	26 295	57
Brookline	MA	Yes	62	\$395 300	58 126	126
Lexington	MA	No	35	\$413 500	84 422	183
Wellesley	MA	Yes	55	\$544 400	99 184	215
Birmingham	MI	Yes	40	\$300 700	80 622	164
Rochester	MI	Yes	6	\$215 100	74 723	152
Troy	MI	No	5	\$217 800	77 673	158
Plymouth	MI	No	7	\$198 200	74 723	152
Maryland Heights	MO	No	4	\$107 900	48 881	110
New Rochelle	NY	Yes	54	\$299 900	55 127	109
Scarsdale	NY	Yes	59	\$691 400	182 070	360
Rutherford	TN	Yes	25	\$48 900	48 900	n/a ^a
Dublin	OH	No	2	\$24 900	91 355	204
Powell	OH	No	4	\$259 200	47 917	107
Bucks County	PA	No	17	\$163 200	59 885	126
Delaware County	PA	No	41	\$128 800	49 904	105
Montgomery	PA	No	29	\$160 700	60 836	128
University Park	TX	Yes	48	\$517 300	92 939	196
Mean			24	\$310 012	\$ 70 327	148

Note: ^aNot located in a metropolitan area.

100% historic; and Boomburb 33% historic). The median household income of the recommended communities was 148% higher than the median household income of their metropolitan area ($t, 27 df = 4.297, p < 0.001$), with all but four having median incomes higher than the metropolitan average (Table 5).

Ordinance Analysis

Twenty-four communities responded that they had adopted new regulations or had adjusted their regulations over the last 10 years to address oversized housing. The study succeeded in obtaining ordinances from 19 of them, and obtained ordinances from 10 other communities, which it was known had oversized house developments (not sent a survey because they did not arise from the snowball sample). Table 6 lists the cities and types of ordinances. Inspection of the Table

Table 6. Summary of design review process

City, state	Design approval	Separate Design Guidelines Manual	Approval by
<i>Design Review Process Citywide, Including Residential</i>			
Burlingame, CA ^a	Separate process	Y	Planning Commission
Clayton, MO ^a	Separate process	Y	Architectural Review Board
Cleveland, OH	w/Building permit approval	N	City Planning Commission
Costa Mesa, CA	w/Zoning compliance approval	Y	Director of Planning Division.
Laguna Beach, CA	w/Planning application approval	N	Design Review Board
Oakland, CA	Separate process	N	Director of City Planning
Rochester, MI	w/Site plan approval	N	Planning Commission
San Jose, CA	w/Site plan approval	Y	Planning Director or City Council
San Mateo, CA ^a	Separate process	Y	Zoning Administrator
Scarsdale, NY	w/Building permit approval	Y	Board of Architectural Review
Town & County, MO ^a	w/Building permit approval	N	Board of Alderman
Wellesley, MA	w/Site plan approval	Y	Design Review Board
<i>Design Review Process Citywide, Excluding Residential</i>			
Glen Ellyn, IL ^a	n/a	N	Architectural Review Commission
San Juan Capistrano, CA*	n/a	Y	Design Review Committee
University Park, TX	n/a	N	Urban Design & Development Advisory Committee
Wilmette Village, IL	n/a	N	Appearance Commission
<i>Design Review Process for Special Districts</i>			
Austin, TX	n/a	Separate for each district	Historic Preservation Commission
Birmingham, MI	n/a	N	Historic Design and Review Commission
Brookline, MA	n/a	Y	Preservation Commission for Historic Districts
Colorado Springs, CO	n/a	Hillside Development Guidelines	City Development Services and Planning Division
Dallas, TX	n/a	Separate for each district	n/a
Davie, FL ^a	n/a	N	n/a
Glendora, CA ^a	n/a	N	Landmarks Commission
Grapevine, TX ^a	n/a	Historic	Historic Preservation Commis.
Naperville, IL	n/a	N	Historic Site Commission

Table 6. *continued*

City, state	Design approval	Separate Design Guidelines Manual	Approval by
New Rochelle, NY	n/a	N	Landmarks Review Board or Planning Board (Water View Overlay Zone)
Tucson, AZ	n/a	Advisory Residential Design Guidelines	n/a
<i>Under Study or Rescinded</i> Atlanta, GA	n/a	N	Urban Design Commission for historic landmarks/districts
Menlo Park, CA ^a	n/a	N	n/a

Note: ^aThese communities did not receive surveys, as they did not come up through the snowball sample, but we found they had ordinances, and thus obtained them.

indicates that historic preservation (maintaining the character of the neighbourhood) was an important concern to these communities. Many communities with regulations only had historic overlays, suggesting that they saw the district overlay as a way to control oversized houses, possibly in a more politically palatable manner.

The analysis grouped the ordinances into four categories:

- (1) *Citywide design review process including single-family development (12 cities)*
In this category, seven cities had separate formal design guideline manuals. The rest integrated requirements in their ordinances and gave guidance through their boards, commissions or planning director. Four had formal design review boards, with others requiring approval through existing boards and commissions or administratively through the planning director. Some communities had a design review process as a separate approval process, while others had it integrated into the site plan/building permit approval process. Most communities require, or are considering, a public review process for design review, including public notification and public hearings.
- (2) *Citywide design review process (excluding single-family development) (four cities)*
In this category, all four cities had a separate design review board in place and their ordinances all had requirements addressing oversized housing.
- (3) *Special district design review (11 cities)*
This category included historic, conservation, overlay or environmentally sensitive districts. Design approval for construction in these districts rested primarily with historic or landmark commissions or had administrative approval. Some cities had separate design guideline manuals, but the guidelines centred on historic architecture or an environmentally sensitive area.
Two cities relied on recommendations and education rather than controls. Naperville, Illinois's *Residential Teardown Guidelines* requires property owners considering demolishing a house to meet with city staff to discuss the project.

All tear-down applicants are to review a workbook that described how to determine the appropriateness of a new home in an existing neighbourhood. The approach sought to use “peer pressure, strong community involvement and positive reinforcement to guide the redevelopment of established neighbourhoods” (Community First website). In Tucson, Arizona, the design guidelines are “an additional resource ... [but] not regulations or development standards” (*City of Tucson Design Guidelines Manual*, 1999, p. 1).

(4) *Design review process under study or rescinded (two cities)*

Atlanta, Georgia has an Infill Task Force studying stronger regulations for single-family residential development, and considering changes to FAR, height and setback regulations. It has proposed FAR averaging to make bulk mass fit neighbouring structures. Menlo Park, California, has been working on revisions to single-family residential regulations since 1999, including using citizen task force. During that time, two ordinance amendments were adopted and subsequently rescinded (Wallace, 2004). The council is considering new changes to amend the zoning regulations for single-storey, single-family residential development.

Communities have regulated both infill and greenfield developments to insure developments suitable to the community standards. The results suggest more regulation of oversized houses in new-build than infill communities. Of those communities with new regulations for oversized houses, one-quarter look like infill (most of their housing stock was built before 1950), 37% look like newer-build communities (with 10% or less of their housing stock built prior to 1950), and the rest have a mix of newer and older housing.

Conclusion

This study confirmed a substantial presence of McMansion infill houses, as well as greenfield plats. The infill McMansions probably result from the convergence of pressures—increasing demand, high land values, lack of building sites and the desirability of the area for its location, amenities or character. Yet, not all inner suburbs have the same infill potential or pattern. In some metropolitan areas, wealth may spread from the core in one primary direction (Hoyt, 1939). Older suburban neighbourhoods in this path of wealth may tend to attract McMansions. Other cities may have a multiple nuclei structure with less predictability about where different land uses and social groups appear (Harris & Ullman, 1945) and a different pattern of high-class residential districts and McMansions. These early ecological models overlook the role of political, social and economic arrangements, class conflicts, the role of government and real estate developers and shifts in the economy which predict a more varied and pattern less explainable by formal structure (Gottdiener, 2000; Kleniewski, 2002). The research here suggests that historic character in inner-ring suburbs with higher medium incomes may attract infill McMansions. To give communities a better predictive model for McMansion developments, future research should explore the pattern and predictors of McMansions.

Planners reported adopting a variety of regulatory measures to minimize their impact, most frequently relying on building height, bulk and mass controls and design review. The analysis of city ordinances and regulations confirmed a

variety of methods that cities use to regulate oversized houses. The different approaches may relate to the different kinds of communities (historic, inner ring, boomburg, edge, beach or resort), and the degree to which the proposed development fits the house style or size specified in the original master plan. Some cities have specific processes in place, including design review boards and design guidelines to assist in regulating these types of developments. Others amend their city codes, without requiring separate board approvals, applications or design guidelines. Still others favour education over further regulations.

New urbanists call for form-based codes to control building shape and form (Congress of New Urbanism, CNU, 2004). The graphic nature of form-based codes make them user friendly and, keyed to single family houses, their emphasis on bulk, height and dimensional standards makes them suitable for controlling McMansion size (Ben-Joseph, 2005; Hinshaw, 2006). The New Urbanist transect classification system for controls (CNU, 2004) can help with greenfield plats. Transects cover cross-sections of the environment (such as suburban, general urban or urban centre) according to the density and intensity of use. Extending form-based codes to the transect can ensure the desired form quality in each transect zone, including areas such as T3 Suburban, the likely location of new plats (Duany & Brain, 2005). Future research could study the degree to which communities are adopting form-based codes and transect-based zoning to regulate oversized houses, and the success of these approaches compares to others.

However, most cities with infill oversized houses or plats did not adopt or adjust regulations to control them. This agrees with findings on regulations for Smart Growth in Illinois (Talen & Knaap, 2003). Perhaps communities do not see a public purpose in such regulations. After all, some residents and communities might want larger houses and plats, as a way to improve property values; or they may view the contribution of infill oversized houses to reducing sprawl as more important than possible negative impacts on the street character. They may fear that regulations lead to less flexibility in design and construction for developers and concerned neighbours, or that boards or commissions might make arbitrary decisions, not based on approved codes or ordinances. The right type of code can overcome these potential problems. Resources limitations may prevent some cities from creating new boards, applications or guidelines, to avoid the increased workload for existing staff. If only a few such developments occur, the community may view the objections as a NIMBY, the regulation of which might reduce property values throughout the community. Finally, they may lack the political will to enact controls. As Menlo Park showed, regulations of oversized houses can become a contentious political issue.

In part the absence of controls may result from a lack of consensus among residents, city staff and public officials. One city confidentially reported a lack of:

consensus among town officials or residents whether mansionisation should be curbed. The effort to have meaningful measures adopted at our town meeting have been largely unsuccessful. Residents are too fearful that such controls will reduce their property values ... We are in the process of examining the individual regulations for patterns.

What goal is sought by the regulations? As one survey respondent suggested, "the real question is 'why is a home considered oversized?'" The surveys did not

request the reasons communities enacted regulations or to what those communities with regulations were reacting. However, a review of common objections by communities and residents indicated that complaints most often came from immediate neighbours, complaining about the duration of the project, the removal of vegetation, the loss of smaller, older or historic homes, the size and character of the house, and traffic and noise (Szold, 2005). These complaints suggest that the regulations seek to protect the property rights of a resident from undesirable impacts. If size is the issue, then it becomes a question of the compatibility of the size of the new development with the existing development. The regulation needs to control relative size. While this is not difficult, many cities with regulations do not require the new homes to be of similar size to existing homes. Form-based codes could work well to address this shortcoming.

One city reported that it had tried a variety of techniques to regulate oversized houses, but none worked. Instead, the regulatory changes caused home prices to increase as a result of further restrictions on development in a finite marketplace of fully developed neighbourhoods.

How can planners encourage development compatible with existing neighbourhoods, while not dramatically increasing land values and home prices? Perhaps, as one planner suggested, education can help. Beyond that, different kinds of cities may require different kinds of solutions. For example, in historic districts, regulations would need to maintain the historic character both in the size and style of houses. Other communities, which have a master plan designating the style and size of houses, may have to deal with a house that does not fit those requirements. Beach and resort districts may have other requirements, perhaps related to character and parking generated by larger size houses.

The survey did not allow separate analysis of responses for each kind of infill development—on vacant lots, additions or tear-downs—and the regulatory controls for them. Perhaps different strategies emerge in relation to the dominant kind of development. Historic districts can control the tearing down of houses through architectural review. Planners might face a complex problem in dealing with the regulatory differences between house renovations and complete tear-downs or construction on a vacant lot. A tear-down or new construction gets a dramatic result, but a series of renovations and additions can get the same result over time.

The authors have argued elsewhere for a proactive approach (Evans-Cowley & Nasar, 2004). In a proactive approach, planners would try to identify likely areas for McMansions, possibly using models predicting areas likely to attract McMansions. Then, instead of waiting, planners could try to put good controls in place. Once a first McMansion receives approval, a community may not know how many others will follow. Perhaps, a moratorium, such as the one in Eastchester, New York (Foderaro, 2001), would give communities the time needed to study the options.

Strategies could range from the local to the state. In a local block-by-block strategy, if most neighbours on a block indicate that they do not want a McMansion on their street, the city would act to achieve a more acceptable outcome. At a statewide level, the state could impose taxes on oversized houses (Diskin, 2004) as a way to both limit them and provide resources for affordable housing.

However, many communities will rely on local controls. In the local context, planners may feel hesitant to recommend controls, as the broader community may

object. Before enacting those controls, they need better data on what others have done and how residents react to these kinds of developments nearby them. At what point would most neighbours perceive an infill house as too large and detracting from the character of the street? To find which controls yield the most desirable outcome for neighbours, one could simulate houses under different controls, and obtain evaluations of those simulations from residents.

In sum, McMansions as both infill and new plats continue to proliferate in American cities. The phenomena may represent a sea change in which residents with money are moving back into older suburbs. The two types of developments present different concerns: the first raises concerns about compatibility with neighbouring homes, and the second raises concerns about sprawl. The continued proliferation of oversized homes presents many other questions. To what extent do infill McMansions attract urban or suburban residents, who otherwise would have moved to a larger new house in the exurbs? What are the consequences of wealthier people moving back into these suburbs? Will whole districts get upsized, with attractive bungalows giving way to vulgar expressions of excess? Who are these people, and how do they relate to demographic shifts with baby boomers moving into retirement? Do the upsize houses fit changing structure of the American household? Are professionals moving their parents back in and extended family, servants, flexibility, or do fewer people inhabit these larger homes. Finally, although communities have adopted different regulations to control McMansion development, planners need an evaluation of the types and forms of controls to learn which work better for particular situations.

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Appendix I

For a national study on newly-built or expanded oversized houses (sometimes called McMansions or Monster homes), we are asking communities and planning agencies across the country a few questions. These developments take two forms: New subdivisions with large homes (over 3000 square feet) on relatively small lots constructed by tract homebuilders; and infill developments in existing neighbourhoods where an empty lot is used or an existing home is demolished or added to and replaced with a larger home than those typical in the neighbourhood. Answers will be kept anonymous and confidential. It should only take a few minutes and will provide information about this growing planning concern. We will be happy to share our results with you.

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1. We would like to learn about these developments in your community.

(1a) To what extent is your community seeing the development of these new oversized house subdivisions. How many plats were approved in 2003 for these developments?

None at all 1 5 5 10 11 20 21 30 More than 30

(1b) Estimate the number of tear-downs, houses that were torn down and replaced with oversized homes, in your community in 2003?

None at all 1 5 5 10 11 20 21 30 More than 30

2. What is the typical value of such a home that is built? _____

3. If this kind of development is happening in your community, why do you think it is happening in your community? _____

4. Has your community adopted new regulations in the past 10 years to control this type of development? Yes No

5. IF YES, which types of code or regulatory technique has your community adopted to control the impact of these developments? (check all that apply)

Floor Area Ratio (FAR)

Gross Floor Area (GFA)

Floor Area Limit (FAL)

Limit building height

Increased front yard setback

Increased back yard setback

Increase side yard setback

Make bulk and mass fit neighbours

Privacy protections

Daylight plane requirements

Design Review

Other (Please describe) _____

6. If your community has modified its regulations in response to the construction of these developments, please describe the changes that were put in place.

7. Please send us a copy or provide a website address where we can find these regulations _____

8. What is your impression of the success of this approach in controlling oversized homes?

Successful Fairly Successful Neither Fairly Unsuccessful Unsuccessful

9. In your metropolitan area, can you recommend other communities with this type of development, that we should contact for information?

10. If you have anything else you think we should know about the issue of these oversized house

developments, please let us know.

Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Jack L. Nasar, Professor City & Regional Planning

Jennifer Evans-Cowley, Assistant Professor City & Regional Planning