

## The Builder's Engineer

### Honey, I Shrunk The Lots



By **Tim Garrison**,  
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How many lots can you cram onto an acre of land? Five? Ten? Fifteen? Would you believe 25, or more? And I'm not talking "units" as in multi-story.

Any developer knows, the more lots, the merrier in terms of a subdivision's profit potential. Since you can't make an acre bigger, to squeeze more lots onto one, you must make the lots smaller. But who wants a tin can for a lot?

It turns out lots of folks do; if the can is designed right.

I didn't make up the title to this column, it is the title of a seminar I recently attended, put on by a business associate and principal of Mithun Architects in Seattle, Bill Kreager. Actually, this particular seminar is the sequel to another Bill taught a year ago. For me to attend a sequel which isn't showing at a local matinee tells you it's got to be good.

In the good old days, let's call them the "Leave it to Beaver" days, the majority of the home-buying public was the nuclear family, with 2.3 kids, a dog, two cars (a "sedan" and a "station-wagon") and a chicken in every pot. Today, that demographic represents, according to Bill, less than 20% of the home-buying public. The other 80% are mostly empty-nesters and singles. Let's call this new demographic the "nestles".

So where do nestles want to live? Well, the traditional 3-bedroom, 2-bath split-level house on 15,000 square feet of maintenance isn't the correct answer. They want attractive, traditional-looking smaller homes on small lots, with little or no upkeep responsibilities. They want to be near shopping and services. Walking trails and lots of maintained open space are important. Oh, and by the way, price matters too.

There is a good reason Bill's seminars are always packed. Yes, he is an excellent speaker, not to mention entertaining (my favorite slide shows a dozen smiling people crammed into a smallish hot tub. Bill explains that high-density *can* be fun.) More important, anyone in the building industry needs to be aware that this is a vital, upcoming trend in housing; an opportunity not to be missed.

And I'm not just talking about those of us in the private sector. We can't develop and build things bureaucracies don't allow (heck, we have enough trouble building things

they do allow). A huge problem is that many jurisdictions still operate under codes and ordinances created in the Beaver Cleaver days. Some have been updated; layered with gobs of spaghetti and other labyrinthine measures, but the end product is still mostly unmanageable. New, simple, progressive-thinking codes are needed.

Bill showed several examples of urban infill projects that look great, fit with the character of the neighborhood, provide homes for many, and increase the tax base of some lucky jurisdiction. Okay, so the projects can make the developers wads of money too, but isn't that what win-win is all about?

Specifically, how is desirable high-density, low-rise housing accomplished? Here are a few tips:

- Use narrow lots, minimizing side yards and maximizing the number of lots per lineal foot of road.
- Front houses on parks and other open space to give each residence the feel of a spacious yard / recreation area.
- Use landscaping to contain and disguise stormwater treatment and detention facilities.
- Use narrow streets. Not only does this allow more useable lot area, it decreases non-stormwater-friendly pavement. Fire marshals will be concerned, but there is precedence to demonstrate it can work well.
- Use alleys in lieu of avenues.
- Use carriage style homes (living space above parking areas).
- Use cottage style homes (homes fronting on common landscaped walkway areas with group parking in back).
- Mix in smartly designed multi-family dwellings. Bill showed several examples of multi-plexes that looked just like another large house in the neighborhood.
- High-density can be a terrific product, but it won't work everywhere. Case in point: there is a charming, brightly colored, well-built and planned cottage home community on the outskirts of a town near me. It's not selling worth a hoot because it is too far removed from the downtown core. Nestles (apparently) like walking or taking the bus.
- Lastly, employ a good architect to help with layout and site design. Engineers have been cookie-cuttering Leave-It-To-Beaver neighborhoods for decades. I'll be the first to admit I have no business trying to design the attractive neighborhoods Bill showed. Storm drainage and sewer – fine, I can still handle those. Goes downhill; always has, always will. But when it comes to “form”, well, that's just not my bag.

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