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The Power of Good Design, Part 2

A better town home experience: It's not a matter of cost

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Once again I'd like to remind readers that each two-day Retooling the U.S. Housing Industry Executive Builder Workshop explores opportunities to transform five homeowner experiences: community, design, performance, quality, and sales. This week, I'd like to build on the power of good design to be transformative addressed last month. That article examined the profound improvement possible with simple layout changes to the typical strip shopping mall. In this article I have chosen to focus on a similar opportunity to achieve a dramatic improvement in customer satisfaction with simple layout changes to the typical town house development.

Traditional town home developments represent a significant design challenge because they employ a long, narrow foot-print as shown in Figure 1 (town house units are shown in grey and rear lawns shown green). This leaves very limited windows on the just the front and back elevations. Add one- or two-car garages consuming valuable real estate on the front or back elevation and the challenge gets even bigger. As a result, there is little opportunity for

indoor/outdoor linkages, a critical concept for making homes feel and live bigger we discuss under 'Right-Sizing the Right-Way' at Retooling Workshops. The common result is 'postage stamp' back yards that get little attention, are minimally used, and are not seen as a valuable feature (also shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1: Typical Town Home Layout with Back Yard

We can do so much better with minimal or no increase to the amount of land or construction cost. It's just a matter of good design. So what's the big idea? It's moving away from the traditional layout in Figure 1 to an 'L-Shaped' layout as shown in Figure 2 (again town house units are shown in grey and the resulting courtyards shown in green). The beauty of this design strategy is:

- Courtyards add substantially more value to each home compared to postage stamp back yards.
- There is substantially greater access to daylight and outdoor space for the entire floor plan.
- There is no/minimal loss in net number of units when the rear lawn area no longer used is repurposed for additional development.
- The resulting additional buffer space between units minimizes the two largest occupant complaints of attached housing, noise and odors.
- Simple 'quiet wall' designs with no windows on the adjoining unit facing the courtyard enable maximum privacy.



Figure 1: Town House Layout Optimized for Daylight/Outdoor Linkages with Court Yard

It turns out that an 'L-Shaped' town house development was the design solution I choose for one of my first major design studio assignments at Syracuse University School of Architecture. I don't think any other design project

during my tenure at architectural school got a more positive critique or higher grade. I remember the details of that project forty years later. I'd love to think that I understood back then the power of the simple design choice I made. In the end, it was probably luck or possibly just good design instinct. But now I do understand the actual design concepts and it would be a shame to miss them when the outcome is a completely transformational homeowner experience. Good design is beyond powerful...it's emotional.

So maybe it's worth investing in leading experts to get it right.

*This article is part of a series on housing innovation based on the author's book, **'Retooling the U.S. Housing Industry: How It Got Here, Why It's Broken, and How to Fix It.'** This book examines opportunities to transform five key homebuyer experiences: 1) Community, 2) Design, 3) Performance, 4) Quality, and 5) Sales. Each article features one innovation or business principle covered in workshops with builder executives. Find out how to participate in one of these workshops at www.SamRashkin.com.*

