

38,000 square feet. That's the size of a house that was designed for a lot in Greenwich, Connecticut.

That's most of a football field. It isn't going to be built; the neighbors got themselves into a self-righteous lather about how inappropriate such a big house was, and their very public protests persuaded the owner to withdraw his plans. The neighbors' houses are in the modest range of 27,000 square feet.

There goes the neighborhood—right back to feudal times. You thought McMansions were bad? The new kind of conspicuous consumption is hidden behind massive stone walls—but you can spot it a mile away. Each family lives in a castle: the master and his mistress inhabit their suite of rooms; the children and the servants cluster in wings round the back. Each house has at least four kitchens. There is a media theater for entertainment. There are dressing rooms, spas, and hairdressing salons. In feudal Connecticut, houses have elaborate gymnasiums complete with climbing walls, swimming pools, and tennis courts, their own skating rinks, skeet-shooting ranges, carousels, putting greens—in fact, anything you can think of in the way of entertainment that was once enjoyed in communion with other families, in clubs or, God forbid, public parks.

Public? What a quaint idea. How inconvenient to wait your turn to tee up, or to have to skate past the slowpokes by the railings. Who knows who you might bump into? How quaint, the idea that you might spend several million dollars to fund a carousel so that hundreds of children could have a turn.

I suppose it is only a matter of time before families have their own cobblers and ironmongers and nursing stations on their grounds.

For people living in 27,000-square-foot houses, 38,000 is too big. For people living in 5,000-square-foot houses, 10,000 square feet is an affront. Is it all relative? Why is it inappropriate for people who have bottomless amounts of money to build palaces?

The world has always had its castles; it wasn't so long ago that the gigantic shingled houses along the coast of Maine were being burned to the ground by owners who could no longer afford to keep them up. In England, the proceeds of ticket sales to tourists fund the upkeep of family estates. Perhaps every generation of wealth addresses the same question over again: how much is too much?

The rest of us, meanwhile, are beginning to think about downsizing. The problem is that it is such a depressing term. It puts you in mind of “downturn” and “downhill”—as in a downturn

of fortunes, down at the heels while on the downhill slope of life. I'd like to propose another concept: smartsizing.

Smartsizing has a lot going for it: it implies that you have the brains to understand what is appropriate—not just for your bank account, but for your town and for the environment. Smartsizing also takes into consideration that people need different kinds of dwellings at different stages of their lives. Smartsizing means that thinking trumps showing off.

And so back to supersizing. There's nothing wrong with hunting, gathering, and displaying. Let's assume, for the purposes of argument, that the fellow building the 38,000-square-foot house is using solar panels to heat the house—and giving energy back to his town. Let's assume he has indeed funded the local playground, writing the check even as the Zamboni to smooth his ice rink was being delivered. Let's assume he is an altogether decent fellow. Why shouldn't he have his feudal estate?

In a word: intimacy.

In another word: community.

It is hard to imagine living in a house so large that you must phone your own children for a play date. It is hard to connect with your family when you are sitting at the 20-yard line and everyone else is across the field at the opposing side's 10-yard line. That puts the family at what might be called a safe distance. Is that really how we should live at home? Why is there a need to create vast distances between ourselves? Has it become obsolete to imagine the children playing with blocks on the floor at your feet while you read a novel and your beloved, in a chair close by, knits a scarf? Why is it that we say we are rattling around in large, empty rooms, like old bones in a hushed graveyard, when our houses are too big?

Home is meant to be an environment in which we must relate to one another. From a secure footing there, you ought to feel at home in the world; it is the place from which we venture out to connect with the larger world. You can hardly feel a sense of community when you never bump into your neighbors on the ball field—or catch one another slipping and sliding on that ice-covered rink we call life.




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