



"There's a line in the sand...and you stop building monster homes and you start building something else," says John Emery, president, Fairmont Properties, standing in front of one of his projects in Rosedale.

## Monster mash

By Philip Quinn

**T**he term monster home does not have positive connotations. Think Tony Soprano's sprawling suburban property featured during the opening montage of the TV series *The Sopranos*. Such dwellings signify excess more than clever and efficient design.

The term also has an unsavoury connection to the late 1980s when almost overnight gigantic houses sprung up on Metro Toronto streets leading to complaints and council meetings that eventually gave rise to new bylaws.

"I was around for the last cycle and spent a lot of time going to local councils dealing with infill housing bylaws to regulate monster homes," says Stephen Dupuis, executive vice-president at the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association.

"It's interesting now that I think about it that we're not hearing that reaction so much this time around. [Perhaps] builders are building to a new and more acceptable scale or they're not permitted to build to a more excessive scale."

In areas, such as North York, they tried to deal with the issue by putting in place "monster home" bylaws.

"The first of the bylaw changes for a number of these residential zones changed the height limit...the bottom line is it brought it down from three to two stories...," says Alan Theobald, senior planner for City of Toronto (north district).

"The homes are not as monstrous as they once were," says John Filion, city councillor for Willowdale. "A whole pile of regulations were brought in, but primarily the one that controls the size—the percentage of the lot coverage. It used to be 35%. For my area, I made it 30% of lot coverage... The 30% coverage still produces monsters but not nearly as monstrous... The difference is quite noticeable."

He points to the area between Bayview and Yonge as having the greatest number of new homes in his ward, although almost every

[Onyx Corp. CEO] and Heather Reisman's [Indigo CEO] property is the ultimate example...but you see it to a smaller degree in other areas as well...people buying up neighbouring properties so where there was once two smaller houses there's now one major house."

In some cases, the better-built larger homes actually try to fit in with the surrounding neighbourhood. "There's a fine in the sand...and you stop building monster homes and you start building something else," says John Emery, president, Fairmont Properties, one of the largest builders in Rosedale. "There's a gradual evolution from monster homes into a better designed and built product."

"If you go back 10 to 15 years, the first monster homes were just big. They were really a subdivision house that was big. A lot of them weren't done very well... what's evolved since then, [is that] the consumer is much, much more sophisticated. That's where the market is moving from hugeness to more quality and subtleties."

His company's Carrigan Close development began with a Rosedale mansion on a large property. Fairmont changed it into a three-unit row house, one of which is new. A central road and two single homes were also added. "Many people say, gee that's nice—what's new? It looks like it's been there forever," he says.

Mr. Graham also sees some increased sensitivity from builders: "I think there's a higher level of attention paid to design now. They're trying to reflect in some cases the historical context of the housing that was there. Whereas in the 1980s, there was a kind of ignorance to all of that—very blatantly in some cases."

"Once these houses get built and people live there, they become part of what is defined as the community, so people's mindset of what their community is about has changed from what it was 20 years ago. Whether it's good or bad is questionable. It's changed and that's why these things aren't such a big deal."

As these larger homes become more common, they often end up side-by-side, rather than dwarfing a smaller bungalow.

Sheldon Libfeld, president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association, sees this as evolutionary. "The tearing down of homes which are on large lots and taking out the bungalows and building larger homes seems to be the evolution of the subdivision," he says.

"The growth of an area is strictly an evolutionary process, but in the interim [a house] gets perceived as a monster home. If you come back to that subdivision in 10-15 years, you'll see all the homes uniform and it won't be perceived as a monster home."

Meanwhile, the owners of the remaining small bungalows have some options—especially if they are facing rising property taxes. "If most of the buyers are keeping the older homes and you just have a few tear-downs and monster home developments, then the monster homes are not driving the market...if your taxes are going

up it's just because it's a hot neighbourhood," says Peter Tomlinson, a public finance consultant who studied property assessments in British Columbia during the monster home craze there.

"But if you see after the sales most of the older houses are torn down, then at that point the assessed value on those properties with the older homes rises...it's just land value—the older buildings aren't adding anything to the property. [Then] it's certainly the monster home redevelopment that's causing your taxes to go up."

Residents who purchased their bungalows in the 1950s and '60s are getting a large return on their purchase price if they decide to sell. In many areas, the housing market is being driven by the children of these original bungalow purchasers who are buying their second or third homes and are wanting to return to the city areas where they grew up.

"They're filtering back into that area but are looking for larger homes because their needs are much greater today than they were 50 years ago," says Mr. Libfeld, who is also president of Conservatory Group, which is building homes on the other side of Governor's Bridge across from Rosedale.

"It may be [the number of their] children but it may also be a function of anxiety space. I mean, home libraries today are becoming a large issue."

Other builders echo this belief that it is the consumer's appetite for space and amenities that is creating these bigger houses.

"That's the way we work...clients are asking for an increasing number of bedrooms. It's not uncommon to have five bedrooms now," Mr. Mior says.

"What people really want is something that is really old but they want the modern shower and conveniences," Mr. Emery says.

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street has some of these larger homes. Toronto-area builder Paul Mior, project manager for Abbotford Group Inc. Design Build, also thinks changes to the bylaws have had an impact. "The more active neighbourhoods have created more of a restrictive requirement for these homes."

In some parts of the city there is another variation on the theme: Large homes are spread out over two or more lots.

"What I find, especially in the more affluent areas of Toronto, are monster homes on monster-size properties," says Ian Graham, publisher of *Municipal Issues*, a weekly newsletter. "Gerry Schwartz's



Interior of a Fairmont Properties home in Rosedale.