



OTTAWA CITIZEN

"Garage evolution"

"Front doors and porches should welcome visitors to your home, not an oppressive garage, argue city planners, who are pushing builders to relocate them to the backyard"

by Sheila Brady, The Ottawa Citizen – February 7, 2013

You've seen them on countless suburban streets and maybe winced.

They are snout houses: the design reality caused by builders trying to balance rising land prices, shrinking lots, maintaining affordability and delivering convenience for suburban families demanding double-car garages.

These are mostly suburban homes where garages dominate, sticking out front of the house and all but hiding the front door and any windows. Forget about front porches and room for a tiny outdoor living room to dally and say hello to the neighbors. Instead, thousands of homes built in suburban communities in the '80s and '90s were about Home Sweet Garage.

But there are rumblings of a garage revolution.

"It's the evolution of the garage," says Alain Miguelez, program manager of development review for the inner urban area of Ottawa. To start, the city passed a zoning bylaw last May forbidding garages on lots measuring less than 7.6 meters (24.9 feet) if there is no rear access and imposing restrictions on bigger lots, telling developers who want to do business in the city's five inner wards they would have to tuck garages in the rear or have access off a rear lane. A garage on a lot bigger than 7.6 metres cannot take up more than 50 per cent of the house face.

The zoning bylaw is being contested by the building industry and a decision by the Ontario Municipal Board is expected shortly.

There is also a discussion ready to start to modify garages in the suburbs, says Miguelez, who expects talks with builders, developers and community groups will take place over the next 18 to 24 months.

The aim is to take the emphasis off the garage and put it on the house, he says, citing new communities such as Minto's Ampersand community in Barrhaven. The energy-efficient walk-up apartments have front doors facing the streets and parking tucked into the interior. Ampersand was built to be close to public

transportation, shops and restaurants, taking the reliance off the car.

Mattamy Homes has also developed communities with rear parking in both Fairwinds in Kanata by Scotiabank Place and in Half Moon Bay in Barrhaven.

"These are the type of community planning we will value in the future," says Miguelez.

The concept to overhaul garages is not new.

Snout houses were banned in Portland, Oregon in 2000, despite an uproar from the building industry. But it's a tough battle. Planners in Independence, Texas, for example, looked at banning snout houses in 2004 but backed away.

Contingents of architects and planners have promoted the concept of New Urbanism since the '90s, developing communities built on a grid pattern, with small parks and garages behind homes, like Seaside in Florida and Cornell north of Toronto.

Closer to home, Merle Nicholds, the last mayor of Kanata before amalgamation, pushed Urbandale when it was designing the Kanata community of Village Green, a neighborhood of small parks and porches that pulled up level to garages. There is now a mix of walk-up units with covered parking at the rear, corner townhomes with large wraparound porches and single homes. A central cenotaph across from shops and a Greek Orthodox Church anchors the square.

"The square works really well," says Miguelez. "It is a community gathering spot."

The design change also prompted construction modifications, including a bigger emphasis on insulation when living spaces are located over garages, says Urbandale general manager Matthew Sachs.

"The worst thing is to have a cold floor over the garage, so we also heat the space below the room," he says.

There is no way to predict what will happen in Ottawa with suburban garages, but the city is moving toward a variation on New Urbanism, starting with garages tucked to the back at a demonstration project in the Barrhaven community of Longfields.

The 123-acre site is owned by the Ottawa Community Land Development Corporation and Councilor Jan Harder, who is its chair, is a big booster of rear parking, saying the homes will give a new, gentler face to the street.

"Here we go back to the future and a product that will give real character to the area and freshen up the streetscape," says Harder. "We want front doors and porches facing the street, not garages."

Despite snow removal issues from back lanes, Harder wants to take a chance. "Yes, Ottawa gets snow, but if we want higher density in the suburbs, we are going to have to deal with that issue."

Cardel and Monarch are readying plans to launch new housing types this spring in one sector of the site, which is located off Woodroffe Avenue and Longfields Drive. Cardel is bringing plans for townhomes and semi-detached homes from its Calgary offices, while Monarch is importing plans from successful communities it has built in Toronto.

The Monarch homes, which will include partially finished basements and three bedrooms, range from 2,000 square feet to a tad less than 2,400 square feet. Some of the homes will feature detached rear garages off a laneway, while models will have garages attached to the rear of the house, says Rob Pierce, director of land development for the Ottawa offices of Monarch.

"The days of snout houses are long behind us in suburban communities," says Pierce, who admits the rear-lane concept in Longfields certainly creates an attractive streetscape, but the trade-off is a less efficient use of land because the developer has to build a front road and rear lane.

Monarch and many other builders in the city have already been downplaying the garage by developing designs where the house is flush with the garage, ensuring front doors and porches get "equal or greater emphasis than the garage."

Nearby in Longfields, Bulat Homes, Richcraft, Campanale Homes and Tartan are building housing with unobtrusive parking solutions. "The suburbs are not comparable to inner-city neighborhoods," says Harder. "Yet we still want to move away from the traditional snout houses, the garage out front and a little door. We want house faces that are more enticing."

There have been earlier success stories with moving garages to the back, including Charlesfort Homes, which built two-storey homes with a strong Glebe flavor and garages at the back of a shared laneway in an experimental community in CentrepoinTE in the early '90s that was backed by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp.

"Once we had a model open and people could see how it worked, they sold well," says owner Doug Casey, who wanted homes with laneways where kids could play hopscotch and where the house dominated and the garage was out of sight.

Builder Denis Laporte and marketing expert Ron Desjardins also offered homes with garages on back lanes near Greenbank Road and Strandherd Drive in Barrhaven. "It was a slow, steady sell once we had a model, but it was clear Ottawa buyers would accept

homes with garages at the rear, but they had to be attached to the house," says Desjardins, who is vice-president of PMA Brethour Realty Group.

The garage transformation is also happening in inner-city neighborhoods, including contemporary townhomes in Lindenlea by Modbox, which believes the city's policy leads to more vibrant communities and better buildings because it allows for better living spaces, more light and volume, says spokeswoman Melissa Reeves.

"It allows us to make the most of the limited space available in urban areas."

Other examples include modern designs with garages tucked under second-floor living spaces on Gordon Street and rear parking on a modern stucco duplex built at the corner of Metcalfe Street and Pretoria Avenue.

Initially, custom builder Frank Porcari bought the Metcalfe lot intending to tear down the old single home and build three townhomes with garages facing the street. Early discussions with city planners

changed his planning and the veteran builder and owner of Ottawa Carleton Construction built a semi-detached home on the corner. The homes sold for \$650,000 and \$690,000 (respectively) and residents access the rear garage doors by a shared laneway.

"It's a good solution," says Porcari, who decided he didn't want to fight city hall and prickly planners. "You need garages. It's Ottawa and there is winter."



**Frank Porcari, Owner
Ottawa Carleton
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