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Small houses are big these days

Compact homes with two bedrooms attract small families, downsizers

By KRISTEN HAMPSHIRE
For The Tennessean

When Kelly Mason decided to downsize from a handsome, four-bedroom home — complete with 2,800 square feet of carpet to vacuum — she approached her search for less space with one, non-negotiable prerequisite: She refused to get attached.

"I didn't want a condo," says Mason, 38. "But the last thing I wanted to do was come home from work and take care of the yard."

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Mason's target area was Mt. Juliet, where she landed on a listing for a two-bedroom cottage-style detached home with a private courtyard and all the fixings of a maintenance-free lifestyle — meaning, an option for lawn care.

The best part?

"It's the cutest concept you've ever seen," she says, describing her two-bedroom home as though it could rival her 5-year-old son's



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Kelly Mason says her two-bedroom home in The Village at Providence is just enough room for herself and son Dylan Mason Carpenter.

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refrigerator art. A sunny yellow exterior, swinging black shutters and stained glass on the front door provide character she didn't have with her former "typical big brick house."

And as a single mother who often travels, Mason found a supportive community in her neighborhood, The Village at Providence.

"It's almost like 'Desperate Housewives,' " she jokes. "This neighborhood appeals to a lot of single women." Mason estimates that one-third of residents are single mothers like her. Rather than moving into an apartment or townhouse,

they want privacy and have the money to buy more.

"There are more single women with children today who can afford things like this," Mason says. "The homes by no means are cheap." They range in price from \$240,000 to \$300,000.

At one end of the spectrum is the all-American family, with two or three kids, a dog, a white picket fence and an SUV. Opposite is an emerging market of homebuyers like Mason, who want "efficiency, freedom of lifestyle, low maintenance but still an ability to entertain," says Randy Chastain, president of Parkside Homes, which is developing the two-bedroom homes in The Village at Providence.

Sized for savings

A two-bedroom setup suits single homebuyers like Mason, and it makes sense for sophisticated design-savvy buyers who prefer to outfit a compact home with all the options.

"Homeowners can get a fully appointed house — we aren't talking about vinyl boxes," Chastain says. "We're talking about homes built as well as a \$600,000 house, but more efficiently laid out."

Call it fitting more into less space or biggie-sizing within limits.

Chastain named the concept "value calculus."

"Heating bills are going up, and the cost of construction is going up, so why build a bigger house than you want to maintain and more expensive to purchase, when you can have an efficiently laid-out, entertainment-oriented, two-bedroom home that services all your needs?" Chastain asks.



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When looking for a new home, Kelly Mason didn't want a condo. The smaller home she shares with son Dylan Mason Carpenter allows for a private courtyard and a neighborhood feel. (PHOTOS BY LARRY MCCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN)

TWO-BEDROOM BUILDERS

The construction companies we talked to agree that they would happily cater to a homebuyer's request for two bedrooms by customizing a standard three-bedroom plan. Most companies offer two-bedroom attached units (townhouses and condos) but do not market a two-bedroom plan. These companies actively market a two-bedroom plan in the following communities. Customization is also an option.

DREES HOMES

Brookview Forest, south Nashville (two master bedrooms on first floor)

PARKSIDE HOMES

The Village at Providence, Mt. Juliet

Weston Park, Murfreesboro

Burkitt Place, outside Nolensville

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If this sounds like a pitch, it is. But Chastain says these days, value-minded consumers apply similar concepts to buying any large-ticket item. "It's all about being smart with your purchase," he says, adding that he traded his SUV for a more economical car and sold his oversized home. "Everyone is realizing that we can't waste our money, whether we are buying a house or a car or clothes. We are looking for value, we are looking at our lifestyles and trying to make the equation work."

Only two bedrooms?

At first, people thought Chastain was crazy. "They said, 'You can't sell two-bedroom homes here,' " he says. But he knew how successful such setups were in Florida, where he worked as a developer nine years ago. There, plenty of retired buyers sought space for two. But would it work in Nashville?

"The reality is there is a huge demand here for two-bedroom homes," Chastain says. "There is a convergence of two totally different age groups who want [this plan]." He targets move-down buyers, empty nesters, professional individuals and young couples who don't need extra space.

But don't confuse compact for cramped. At 1,900 square feet, these two-bedroom detached models are a good 700 square feet larger than most town homes. Floor plans are airy, and a dining room space contains plenty of room for a formal table and cabinets.

Parkside Homes also integrates its two-bedroom floor plan into its two other communities, Weston Park in Murfreesboro and Burkitt Place, between Nolensville and Nashville. Chastain already has pre-sold two of them in Burkitt Place, and a model will be open in October.

But not all developers are banking on the two-bedroom model. While other communities offer the same courtyard-equipped, neo-traditional neighborhood, most of their detached homes have three bedrooms, says Chip Kerr, director of builder resources for Crye-Leike Realtors in Brentwood.

For example, take RiverBirch Homes' Westhaven community. Tim Fish, divisional president of RiverBirch, says two bedrooms are available in townhouses, but single-family floor plans must be customized if homeowners want fewer than three bedrooms. Usually this requires not finishing a loft space that might have served as a third bedroom. He says most buyers want all three bedrooms, and those who don't generally aren't considering a detached product.

Kerr adds, "I think three-bedroom homes are still in higher demand when you're talking about detached products. When you talk about attached products (like condos), a two-bedroom is fine." He maintains that most homeowners find some use for that third room — an office, guest suite or even hobby space.

But Kelzey Benward, a sales manager for Drees Homes, says they are testing the market for a two-

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bedroom plan with a model home recently completed and open for tours. "When people see a plan, it helps," she says, noting that Drees Homes standard plans include three or four bedrooms, though the former can be customized into a two-bedroom home if desired.

However, Benward says she notices more homebuyers asking specifically for two first-floor master bedrooms these days. "If you asked me whether people request two-bedroom homes, I'd say no," she says. "But I can definitely say people ask for a second master suite on the first floor — something bigger than a guest suite."

That's because today's homeowners often toss tradition out the door. Two single buyers purchase a home together and both want master bedrooms. Or a family plans for an in-law's suite, Benward points out. "We've made the decision to be flexible and accommodate those who want two bedrooms on the first floor," she says. "We wouldn't develop an entire product line, but we will accommodate buyers who ask for it."

FoxRidge Homes also will convert a three-bedroom/loft floor plan into a two-bedroom model if a buyer requests it, says Todd Reynolds, sales manager. "But I don't see much of a demand for it — at least not in my world," he says.

Newmark Homes is happy to customize their plans, as well. "But if someone wants to do that option, we take a hefty deposit," says Tondra Smith, sales and marketing director. She recalls selling one two-bedroom detached home, but townhouses and condos in this size are more popular, she says.

Too small for resale?

Because the two-bedroom homes in The Village at Providence are brand-new, resale hasn't been an issue thus far. Chastain says a demand for these homes is a strong indicator that selling them later on won't be a problem.

But skeptics pinpoint resale as a reason to build three-bedroom models instead.

"I think it would be tough," Kerr says. Even historic bungalows for sale in east Nashville and other neighborhoods offer three bedrooms, he adds. "Many people have converted some type of room to make it a three-bedroom," he says.

Smith says Newmark Homes doesn't offer a two-bedroom house because the plan alienates most potential buyers. "It is such a specific market," she says. "There are a limited number of people who would want it."

Still, interest in a detached home for two indicates value, Benward figures. Whether resale listings for

two-bedroom plans will close quickly "is a good question," she says. The concept, after all, is fairly new in Nashville's new-construction market.

But selling the plan is a matter of attracting homebuyers like Mason, he adds, who say without a doubt, "It's perfect for me." •



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