

OPINION

LIVING LARGE

Our love affair with big things

By Lawrence A. Herzog

President Bush's trip to Brazil last week renewed attention to our national energy crisis. Brazil is a world leader in alternative biofuel technology. Back in January, in his State of the Union address, Bush surprised some of his critics by mentioning the reduction of gasoline consumption as a goal of his administration.

Cheaper alternative fuels, however, only touch the surface of our crisis. A darker shadow looms over the nation.

Our cities are overweight. We have developed the world's largest appetite for giant homes, more land, more possessions, bigger vehicles, warehouse-sized stores and more malls, all stuffed into the most bloated, sprawling, amoeba-like urban regions on the planet.

Over the last 30 years, our consumption of space has ballooned out of proportion and beyond our ability to sustain it. We are truly living large. We no longer reside in "cities"; we live in "megaregions" whose scale begets a lifestyle that sucks billions of gallons of petroleum and natural gas out of planet Earth.

Consider just a few of our supersizing trends:

HOMES

The average size of a new single-family home in the United States has doubled since the 1950s — from 1,100 square feet to 2,340 square feet. But didn't family size grow during that period? No. Families have actually gotten smaller. During the baby boom (1950s-1970s) household size was 3.7 members per household; today it is 2.6.

Despite rising housing costs, developers around the country report that Americans want even bigger homes. In Texas, new suburban homes averaged a whopping 5,000 square feet a decade ago; but some local build-

nado and other neighborhoods in the San Diego region.

Paul Knox, former dean of the School of Architecture at Virginia Tech University, calls the endless suburbs of oversized homes "Vulgaria." "I dare say, this is not a landscape of homes," he notes, "but of funeral homes. They're on that scale."

Of course, giant houses on large lots mean more building at the fringes of our existing suburbs and beyond, and even greater fuel expenditures for "megacommuters." Just ask residents of Temecula heading south on Interstate 15 every day at 5:30 a.m.

Families with two or three children must ask themselves: Do we really need so many thousand square feet? Even with innovations in heating and cooling systems, and the use of insulation, studies show that giant homes tax our nation's energy supplies.

CARS

President Bush's interest in the cost and supply of fuel misses a larger problem: the size (and weight) of our cars. We are driving larger and larger vehicles. In 1985, only 2 percent of new vehicles were in the SUV category; 15 years later, one in four new vehicles purchased were SUVs. A staggering 50 percent of all U.S. private vehicles owned are now in the "light truck" (SUVs, pickups, minivans) category.

Even in the midst of evidence of dwindling petroleum supplies and escalating prices, automakers reportedly believe U.S. consumers still want SUVs. Honda, for example, is committed to the production of big vehicles. "We've become a nation of truck buyers," Honda Vice President John Mendel told *Newsweek* last spring.

A nation of truck buyers is not sustainable. The federally mandated "corporate average fuel economy" (CAFE) standards set for cars seek to regulate fuel economy goals. But

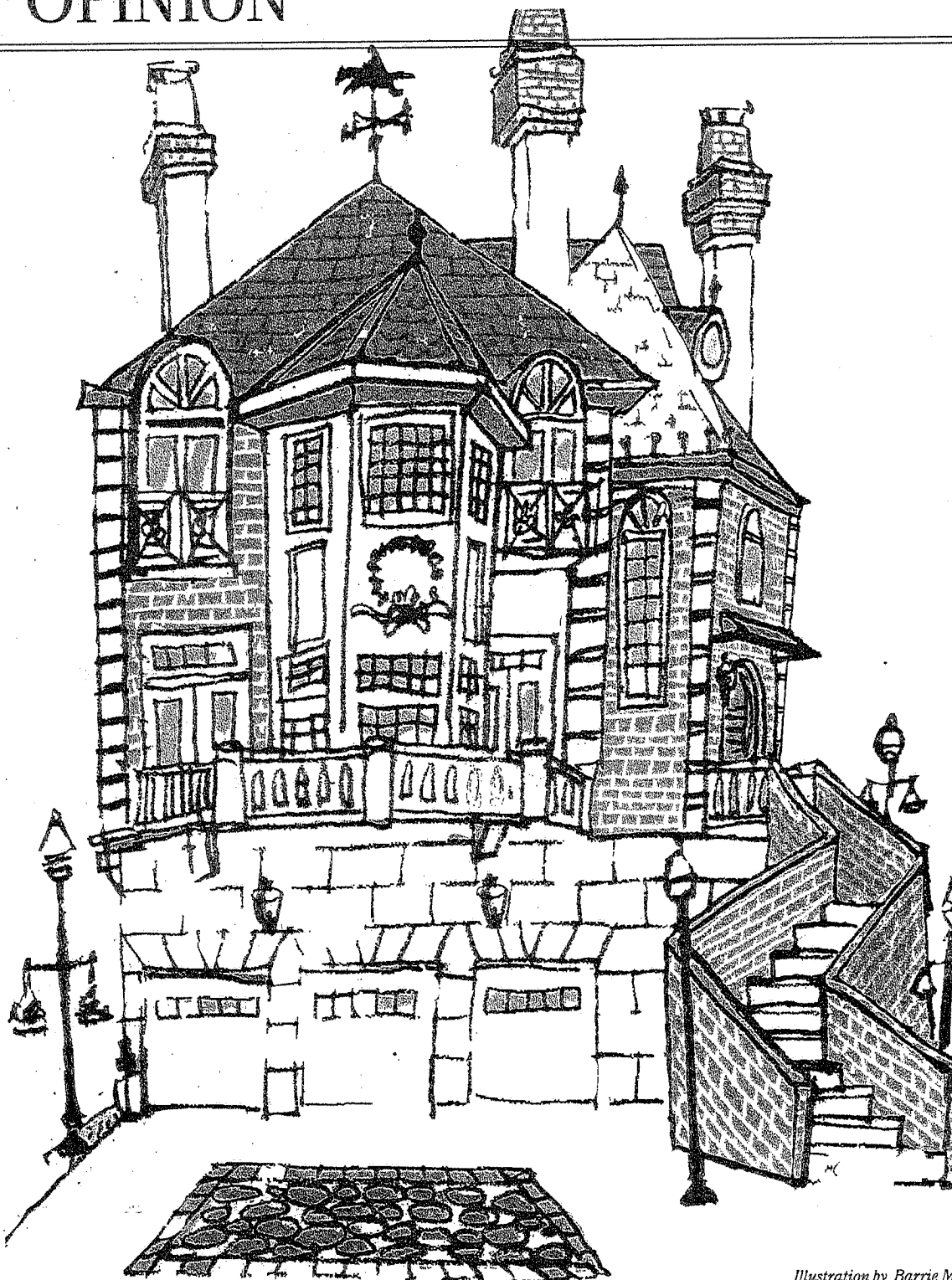


Illustration by Barrie M.

buildup, and thus, along with other greenhouse gases, a direct cause of global warming. The average car will emit 50 tons of CO₂ over its lifetime; the average SUV produces twice that amount. The Ford Excursion generates an estimated 134 tons of CO₂ over its shelf life.

Unfortunately, many Americans consider it a badge of honor to own a gargantuan home or drive an oversized truck or SUV. Automakers play into these American fantasies by giving light trucks names "Range Rover," "Ram," "Yukon," "Expedition," "Escalade" — that evoke the wilder-

gence of "big-box" retailers (Home Depot, Target, Wal-Mart, etc.) and more recently, the introduction of the "megacenters" or "supercenters" that combine big-box, warehouse-style consumption with daily product needs (groceries, pharmacies, etc.).

Big-box stores, at modified sizes, are certainly worth having for the cost savings they bring to consumers. But, like any urban design configuration, when the scale of a retail center grows too large, it distorts urban space, destroys neighborhood scale, pedestrian places and makes people more addicted to oversized cars, driv-

lines, nor any attempt to create texture.

The city of San Diego stood up to the negative effects of megacenters by voting to bar Mart and other superstores from more than 90,000 square feet of area for the sale of groceries. Reblasted by real estate consultants a pro-labor move, this decision in fact, help San Diego preserve neighborhoods, exactly as envisioned in the much heralded "City of Es" master plan for 21st century Diego. (Mayor Jerry Sanders recently isn't committed to the "preservation" principal under his own City of Villages plan. He publicly announced his opposition to City Council megacenters vote after it passed.)

The good news is we don't wait for elected officials to solve energy crisis. We have the power to rethink our consumer habits and values, as we begin to understand implications of living large.

America's democracy was around the idea of balancing private rights against that which we collectively know we must protect "public interest."

Energy policy lies within the of each of us. We can begin by fronting the trade-off between selfish individual desires (for sized cars or homes) and the positive good that beckons us to choices: drive smaller vehicles, and promote pedestrian-scale communities, preserve older neighborhoods closer to the urban core shop at medium-sized malls.

It's time to slim down our This, as Al Gore wisely put it, is an "inconvenient truth," but it we can no longer ignore.

OUR CITIES ARE OVERWEIGHT. WE HAVE DEVELOPED THE WORLD'S LARGEST APPETITE FOR GIANT HOMES, MORE LAND, MORE POSSESSIONS, BIGGER VEHICLES, WAREHOUSE-SIZED STORES AND MORE MALLS, ALL STUFFED INTO THE MOST BLOATED, SPRAWLING, AMOEBA-LIKE URBAN REGIONS ON THE PLANET.

ers report that clients are now demanding residences as big as 12,000 square feet.

Even in inner cities, the trend has been to tear down old homes and replace them with out-of-scale abodes three or four times the original size. We have seen this in downtown Coro-

Herzog is professor of city planning at San Diego State University. His most recent book is "Return to the Center: Culture, Public Space and City-Building in A Global Era" (2006). Herzog was a member of the Citizen's Advisory Board that adopted the City of Villages strategy for San Diego. He can be reached at laherzog@mail.sdsu.edu.

SUVs are not required to follow these stringent rules: they have been classified as "light trucks" since the 1970s (when most trucks were used mainly for farm and commercial work).

Light trucks are not actually very light, and many are flat-out gas guzzlers. While the industry touts average mileages of about 17 mpg, the fact is many trucks and SUVs are extremely inefficient, with city averages between 10 and 12 miles per gallon. The massive Ford Excursion, test-driven by *Harper's* magazine in 2001, was clocked at 3.7 miles per gallon!

Automobile consumption is one of the major sources of carbon dioxide

ness, when, in fact, these vehicles, are mostly crowding the streets (and parking lots) of our cities.

MALLS

Not surprisingly, we are also supersizing the places where we buy our consumer goods. In 1980, the United States had 5 square feet of retail space per person; today the average is 20 square feet per person.

Shopping malls have been around since the 1960s, but they have continued to grow in size, and take on new and more bloated forms. Most notably, the last decade saw the emer-

ing on freeways, and living in featureless suburbs.

Scientists tell us that energy conservation is best achieved when we preserve small scale, unique "bioregions." For cities, this means we need to be careful not to allow mall builders and developers to simply cover the Earth with generic megacenters. Indeed, as one expert on smart growth recently said: "People love what's inside Superstores. They just hate what's on the outside."

Superstores or "Sprawl Marts" (as some critics call them), are not only oversized, they are ugly, one-story warehouses with no windows or roof