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SUPERSIZE ME: CONDO BUYERS LIVING LARGE IN ROOMY UNITS

Linda Newman and her husband, Norman, were ready to trade the 3,700-square-foot house where they raised their children for a condominium that was smaller.

But, Newman adds, not too small.

So Newman bought a 2,440-square-foot condo at Lincolnshire Place in Lincolnshire. Like many empty-nesters, Newman craved the condo lifestyle that has freed her from gutter-cleaning and weed-pulling. She didn't need as many bedrooms as she did when her kids were young. But she didn't want a condo that was so small that she would have to abandon all the stuff she had accumulated over the years.

"We wanted room for our dining-room set, lots of closets and plenty of room in the great room and the master bedroom," says Newman. Add a home office and another bedroom/bathroom suite, and Newman has a roomy but efficient condo, she says.

Compared to some of her neighbors' units, Newman's condo is modest. Weiss Development's Lincolnshire Place has condos as large as 3,272 square feet. Base prices start at \$399,900.

From 1999 to 2007, the average condo size grew 16 percent, from 1,360 to 1,577 square feet, according to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB). In that same period, the average single-family house grew 12 percent, then began to decline in 2008.

It's a demographic thing, says Gopal Ahluwalia, vice president of research at the NAHB. "The Baby Boomers are buying condos now and they don't want to downsize too much. They only want a few bedrooms, but they want them to be big and have their own bathrooms because the extra bedrooms may be for visiting kids, a caretaker or an elderly parent. And, the rooms have grown to fit their larger things. Kitchens have bigger appliances and a lot of them. Family rooms and master bedrooms must fit today's huge TVs."

"Thirty years ago, condos were primarily starter homes for first-time buyers," says Tod Desmarais, senior vice president for Glencoe-based Optima Inc. "Now the Baby Boomers are buying them, too."

Although the condo market still includes smaller condos that primarily serve the first-time buyers, he explains, larger condos that primarily serve Baby Boomers have grown, which has increased the average condo size.

Although Optima hasn't upped the size of its condos, says Desmarais, it has seen a growing number of buyers combine them to make larger units. "Ten years ago, this rarely happened," says Desmarais. "Now, they combine two or three 1,000- or 1,500-square-foot units. That doesn't include our penthouses, which are even bigger."

Empty-nesters and young, professional couples are buying at Focus Development's Courthouse Square in Wheaton, where midrise condos from 800 to 2,600 square feet are base-priced from \$199,000 to \$600,000, and "luxury condos" with 2,200 to 4,800 square feet start at \$1.4 million. These biggies include home offices, multiple bathrooms and formal living rooms as well as family rooms.

The largest units were the first to go at Residential Homes of America's (RHA) Amberley Woods in Lake Forest, where condos range from 1,365 to 2,650 square feet and start at \$450,000. In addition to the Boomers buying them for themselves, many have bought them for their children who attend area colleges or boarding schools, says RHA president Ann Danner. "Then they can stay there when they visit their kids," she explains.

Condos at the Winthrop Club in Evanston range from 790 to 3,408 square feet, but the hottest sellers are

those that measure 2,600 or more, says Chad Baugh, director of sales and marketing. The penthouses, which are larger, sold first. The base prices for the 2,600-square-foot-plus units are \$1.2 million.

The big condo trend is not limited to the suburbs, where homes have traditionally had more elbow room.

At 900 N. Michigan Ave., condos have grown to feed buyers' hunger for space. When the 106 condos on floors 48 through 66 were built in 1990, they ranged from 1,470 to 2,700 square feet, says Charles Porter, principal of Development Management Associates LLC in Chicago. But when his company returned in 2007 to transform floors 21 through 28 from office space to 47 residences, the staff suggested he build them bigger, based on what they were hearing from the residents. "So we built them from 1,900 to 4,800 square feet and the largest ones sold first," says Porter. The base price for the remaining units is \$2.3 million.

What changed since 1990? "Buyers expect more storage space, bigger master bedrooms, eat-in kitchens plus dining rooms, and family rooms plus dens," says Porter. "And, overall, they want bigger rooms."

Down the street, sales are brisk at Ten East Delaware, where units that are at least 2,900-square-feet start at \$1.5 million. Unlike smaller condos, these have separate informal and formal living areas. The bedroom wings are separate from formal areas so guests don't wander into buyers' private spaces, as they were apt to do in condos of old.

These condos think big in terms of design and amenities, too. "The empty-nesters want everything they had in their single-family houses," says Baugh. "The young professionals want everything Mom and Dad had in the houses where they grew up. If they can afford condos this size, they do not want apartment-grade finishes. They want ahead-of-the-curve finishes, fixtures and technology."

Volume ceilings and lots of windows make these condos' generous rooms seem even larger. Storage is abundant in walk-in closets and pantries. Even parking has expanded. Winthrop Club buyers of units more than 2,000 square feet, for example, have three parking spaces.

Master bathrooms include soaking tubs plus showers, and double-bowl vanities. Kitchens go beyond the range/refrigerator/dishwasher trio to include wine coolers, warming drawers, double ovens and/or island cook tops. Laundry rooms are really rooms, not closets.

Fireplaces, which were rarely found in condos years ago, are common in upscale condos, including those at Courthouse Square.

While they may sacrifice some square footage in their condo purchases, buyers of large condos gain some perks, such as heated garages, minimal maintenance and maximum security.

"Many of these buyers have multiple homes or just travel often, so they want to be able to lock up [their condos] and not worry about them while they are gone," says Porter.

Although Newman has a vacation condo in Arizona, "every day is a vacation" in her Lincolnshire condo, she says. "We have plenty of room to do everything we did in our [single-family] house and to get together with our new neighbors," she says. "But we no longer have to call the landscaper, shovel the snow or even drag the garbage cans to the curb."