The Impact and Controls of Super-sized Houses
Jack Nasar

By Max Weigert '13

Jack Nasar's talk presented the lessons learned from his recent studies in which he uniquely applied the principles of psychophysics in order to better understand the place "McMansions," or very big, elaborate houses, have in relation to the goals of Smart Growth and whether there is a way to effectively regulate these "too big" houses. Nasar first addressed the question of why we should study McMansions. He cited how houses are being torn down across the country to be replaced by McMansions, and that people are going to great extremes to obtain the land to do so. He told of how people are befriending the elderly so that when they pass, they can tear down their houses and build McMansions on their land. Clearly, people are going too far in order to obtain the land necessary for these buildings, showing there is heavy demand.

To further his case statistically, he outlined how from 1988 to 2003 the number of homes with more than 3,000 sq. ft. (the agreed upon minimum size of McMansions) had nearly doubled (Nasar in McMansions, 340). Thus, it is evident that super-sized houses are becoming more common and that there needs to be a dialogue around what should be done. With this point in mind, Nasar researched what effect these McMansions have aesthetically on the community in which they are built, and in what instances these McMansions have significant negative impacts on the quality of life of a neighborhood.

Nasar discussed two different types of McMansions: infill and greenfill. Infill McMansions are typical in highly developed areas as "new houses on vacant lots, tear downs replaced with a new house, or additions to existing houses" (Nasar in Infill McMansions, 1). These houses are always much larger than the others in the neighborhood. In contrast, Greenfield

Mansions are oversized houses built on larger plots of land outside of developed areas. Such houses are directly counter to Smart Growth goals as they increase suburban sprawl. However, Nasar argues that infill McMansions are inline with Smart Growth goals because "They use existing infrastructure, replace obsolete housing, reduce sprawl, and revitalize and promote reinvestment in older suburbs" (Nasar in Infill McMansions, 1). A problem arises, though, when looking at these houses in the context of the rest of the community. When these infill McMansions are built, neighbors often complain of their size, saying they do not fit in with the rest of the neighborhood. They then lobby local governments to implement regulations that prevent these oversized houses from being built. Therefore, Nasar's research looked at what aesthetic and structural factors contribute to these mansions seeming out of place and obtrusive with the goal of determining what limited regulations can allow for these home owners to still be able to build infill McMansions and not have to resort to building greenfill McMansions.

First, Nasar addressed what kinds of communities are likely to have infill McMansions. Typically they are neighborhoods with a higher level of wealth and are often historic communities. He further stated that more research needs to be done in order to predict which communities will have a future problem with McMansions so that they can implement regulations before they are flooded with these building projects. While many McMansions are being built across the country, there is a counter effort to try and regulate them. However, with regulation comes the debate over whether cities have the right to regulate property. While these complaints are being heard across the country, Nasar explains that with *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* (1926), communities were given the right to control land-use and that the courts have only continued to expand upon that right (Nasar in McMansions, 343). There are some strong examples that back up regulation of McMansions in these court cases: In *Berman v.*

Parker (1954) the US Supreme Court stated that "the legislature had the power 'to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy'" (Nasar in McMansions, 343). Such language as "beautiful as well as healthy," strongly reinforces the city's right to regulate McMansions if they excessively infringe upon the aesthetics and overall character of the community.

Next, he outlined some of the regulations that some communities have already been utilizing and that others have been trying to implement. Some have put in place demolition moratoriums that completely stop demolition all together. Another means for regulation is a demolition delay ordinance, which requires you wait 6 to 24 months and jump through some hoops to be able to tear the building down. During this time, it is often required that you meet with your neighbors and with a preservationist. However, after this is done, the demolition can go on as planned. Nasar pointed out that the 6 month delay, which is the most common, is logically not very effective: it usually takes 6 months for the architectural plan to be developed. Therefore, the delay would have to be significantly longer in order to effectively discourage the construction of McMansions.

After giving an overview of current regulations and their downfalls, he moved on to the psychophysical portion of his talk. Nasar asked, "Can we measure aesthetics?" The answer is that with research in psychology you can. While it may seem difficult to quantify objective perceptions of beauty, he pointed out that we all have similar ideas or biases behind our conception of beauty and that there are many commonalities in our environmental preferences. Nasar introduced the Weber-Fechner Law in pschophysics as an important determinant when deciding whether McMansions are "too big" in comparison to the community. The law states that the ratio is more important than the absolute size and suggests that the relative size of an

infill house to the houses around it is more important than its absolute size. This means that "in a block of *small* houses, it should take only a small increase in size for the infill house to stand out as incompatible; while in a block of *larger* houses, it would take a larger increase in size to stand out" (Nasar in Infill McMansions, 2).

His study asked a randomly selected group to rate a set of pictures based on how aesthetically pleasing they were. The images were of blocks of houses aimed to see if the Weber-Fechner law held true and also examined other factors like height versus width as well as compatibility of style. Overall, there were six studies, and they suggested that style and its similarity to its context (i.e. how similar is the style of the McMansion to nearby houses) affects compatibility as well as visual appeal. Thus, houses with similar styles to that of the surrounding neighborhood are more likely to be deemed compatible with the aesthetics of the community. The Weber-Fechner law held true: the infill ratio had a larger effect than did the absolute size in terms of compatibility. Nasar pointed out that once houses started getting twice as big as surrounding houses, that is when people start disliking them. Furthermore, height is a much more important factor than width: changes in width are not nearly as noticeable as changes in height.

Nasar's findings point out that it is not worth setting regulations on absolute size, but rather that it is much more effective to establish regulations based on ratio. Such regulations would be more effective because they could efficiently determine whether or not a house would be "too big" for a community. If it is acceptable due to the comparative size of other houses but not in terms of past absolute size regulations, then it is an instance where the regulation has successfully prevented a greenfill McMansion from furthering suburban sprawl while still respecting the aesthetics of the community. Furthermore, stylistic regulations can be put in place in order to allow reasonable infill McMansions to be built. In all, Nasar's research fills a

necessary gap in understanding how to compromise on the issue of McMansions in order to

achieve the goals of Smart Growth.

References

Jack Nasar's faculty profile: http://facweb.knowlton.ohio-state.edu/jnasar/crpinfo/

Education, Employment, and Publications:
http://www.sociology.ohio-state.edu/cjrc/people/cvs/Nasar.pdf

Sources Cited:
Jack L. Nasar, Jennifer S. Evans-Cowley, & Vicente Mantero, McMansions: The Extent and Regulation of Super-sized Houses, Journal of Urban Design, 2007.

Jack L. Nasar, Arthur E. Stamps, III, Infill McMansions: Style and the psychophysics of size, Journal of Environmental Psychology (2008), doi:10.1016/j.jenvp.2008.09.003