

## AN INTERVIEW

# A Misunderstood Concept

Denver land planner David Clinger believes innovations in high-density detached housing meet today's emerging market head-on.

**PB:** You say the new concepts you present (page 72) can solve land affordability problems, but will municipalities accept such radical departures from the subdivision norm of four units to the acre?

**David Clinger:** Here in Denver, when you add up acquisition and development costs and fees, it's easy to spend \$65,000 before you even start to build a house. Building houses at eight to the acre will halve the acquisition costs (per unit) and cut development costs by 35 percent to 40 percent. Some cities realize that four to the acre zoning prices their own employees out of home ownership. Redeveloping older neighborhoods and passed-over sites to higher densities can change that. Clustering homes also preserves more open space. Not all municipalities will accept these innovations, but many will.

**PB:** How do you overcome opposition to density from neighbors?

**DC:** When the zoning is for multifamily, as it often is for infill and passed-over sites, it's easy to sell these concepts to neighbors who oppose townhouses or condos tooth-and-nail. They'll accept detached housing at eight to the acre as a compromise, especially if you can show them that the community does not present the appearance of high density. They're not thrilled, but they accept it. Then, after the



neighborhood is complete and they see that it actually increases their own property values, former opponents often become our allies on the next community. Do this right and every neighborhood you build will sell your next proposal, to the city and the neighbors.

**PB:** You've been a proponent of Traditional Neighborhood Design in the past. Why are all these concepts front-loaded?

**DC:** There's a place for TND, but it's not appropriate everywhere. Rear-loading carries a high price tag in development costs. Remember that our first goal is to cut development costs, to give the builder the option to pass those savings on to consumers in the form of lower

prices. Our goal is to show other alternatives that still reduce the impact of the automobile on elevations and pedestrians, and create wonderful neighborhoods to live in. These concepts create more social interaction among neighbors and still reduce costs.

**PB:** What type of site should builders look for, if they want to try building one of these high-density detached neighborhoods?

**DC:** I'd look for flat ground first. Topography can be a constraint. Then I'd look for multifamily zoning in an infill location close to an attractive blend of urban lifestyle amenities — restaurants, shops, and entertainment. Many of these sites are just sitting there right now, because apartments are overbuilt in so many markets. Discounted pricing is possible, though I doubt the discount will be much. But high-density detached allows builders to create a niche product with a pricing premium.

The other option is to look for a pod in a master-planned community, where the lower pricing builders can achieve with high density can be used to provide a boost to sales velocities. Developers will be receptive to targeting a few such neighborhoods to create pricing and marketing diversity.

Density is a misunderstood concept. Some of the most beloved communities in the world are among the densest. It's not how dense you make it; it's how you make it dense that matters. **PB**



**Some cities are beginning to realize that four to the acre zoning prices their own employees out of home ownership.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY SUSAN GODDARD

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**BUILD**  
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[ page 88 ]

**SPECIAL REPORT**  
Designing for density

[ page 72 ]

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[ page 85 ]

## Carving a New Niche

Wetherington's design idea scores a touchdown



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>> BY DAVID A. CLINGER,

# New Ideas for Detached Density

Demand is growing for small-lot, detached homes. But how do you deal with the cars while protecting safety and privacy at 7 to 10 units per acre?

**American consumers have always preferred** detached homes. But rising land costs are now driving builders toward higher-density forms of detached housing. The goal: Keep prices affordable for mainstream buyers.

The curious thing is, these economic forces are actually running headlong into an emerging market for higher-density communities. Many people actually prefer quaint neighborhoods with a European feel, especially when they're planted in high-energy, urban-lifestyle locations. But detached density comes with challenges. How do you handle all the cars without creating a sea of garage doors that ruins curb appeal and pedestrian safety? How do you preserve privacy and still maximize use of the small yards?

## New Answers

If we don't meet these challenges, it will become harder to find municipalities that will accept density, and we'll miss a market that's eager to snap up these products. I've been wrestling with this, and here are some ideas that may advance the ball a little further

toward the goal we seek: higher density neighborhoods that stand the test of time, enhancing the property values of residents and neighbors alike.

We've designed these communities to reduce the impact of the automobile. Nothing can separate Americans from their cars. (Every home still needs a two-car garage and two visitor parking spaces.) But it's better if we don't have to look at them all the time, and we definitely don't want neighborhoods where cars seem to be more important than people.

Each concept is also designed to enhance privacy. At the same time, we have increased livability by utilizing use easements that allow us to concentrate exterior spaces where they relate better to indoor living areas. In every case, the land and development costs per home are much lower than in conventional, four-units-per-acre subdivisions, but the neighborhood has the look and feel of a much lower density than it actually achieves.

Keep in mind that, with one exception, these concepts are designed for *flat* sites. Don't use them on sites with 5% grade or higher, or you'll pay more for retaining walls than you save in land costs.



## Courtyard Lot Homes ^

8 UNITS PER ACRE,  
1,800 TO 2,200 SQUARE FEET

This last concept is the exception on several fronts. It can be used on sloping or wooded sites, and it can accommodate ranch walk-outs and larger homes than the other high-density plans. Because of that, *courtyard lots* are great for in-fill sites where you want to build more expensive houses. You can get four large houses onto a site measuring just 140 x 118 feet.

One house faces the street; the others are on the private court, which could be gated. Some of the houses have private patios on two sides. New Urbanism has problems producing private outdoor spaces. But here we see use easements and blank walls used to create two very private outdoor spaces for every home - still at eight units per acre.

## Final Thoughts

We need to overcome those aspects of high-density housing that lead so many people into political opposition of virtually all residential development. Detached density can do that if we plan it carefully to maintain the single-family character people cherish. This means separating cars and people as much as possible, while coordinating indoor and outdoor living spaces.

I believe these concepts can gain acceptance on in-fill sites where political opponents fight tooth-and-nail against even townhouses. And they can be used in suburban developments to gain an affordability advantage that will drive sales. We need to push innovation in land plans, just as we constantly update floor plans to match changing buyer lifestyles. **PB**

**LOG ON** For an interview with David Clinger that further explores these ideas, [www.HousingZone.com/PB/1004](http://www.HousingZone.com/PB/1004)







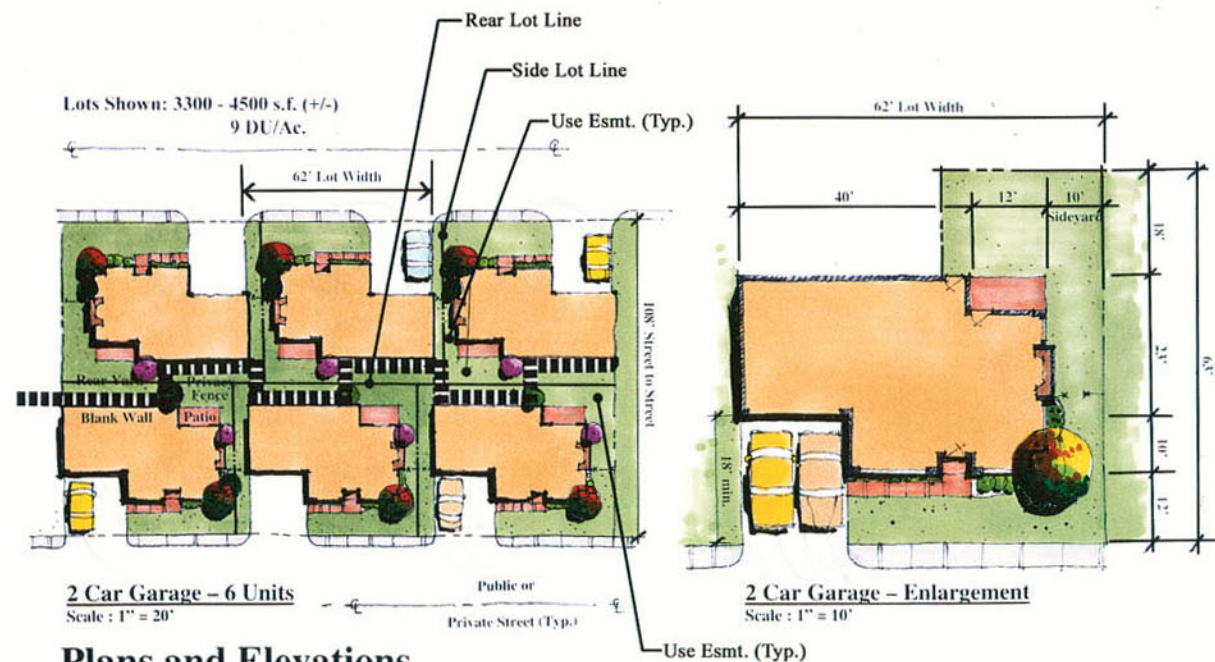
## Sawtooth Lot Homes

9 UNITS PER ACRE, 1,400 TO 1,900 SQUARE FEET

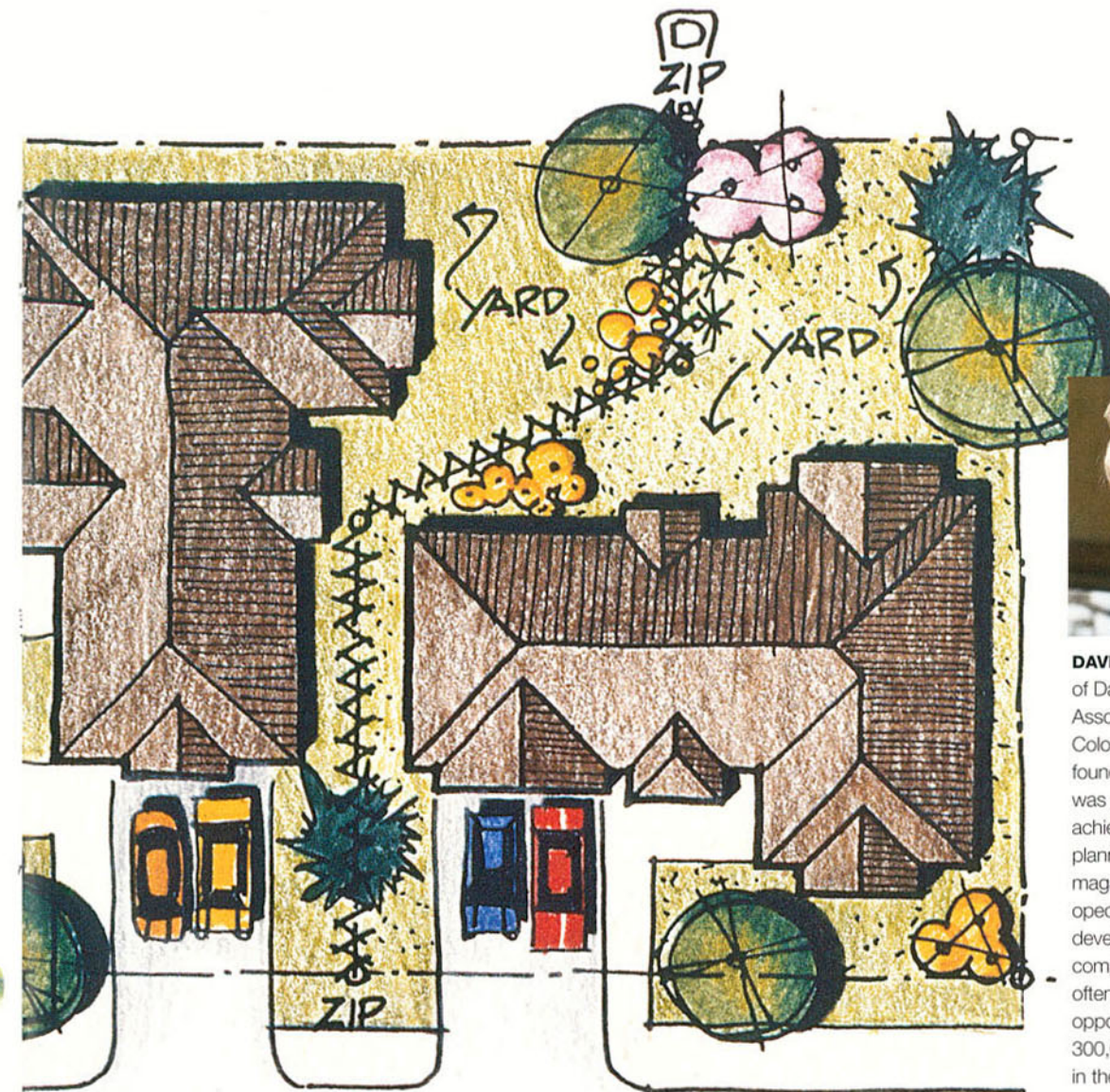
This is a refinement of the wide-and-shallow concept that came out of California in the early 1990s. (Nothing is ever totally new; some of these design elements can be seen in Roman villas.) The trouble with wide-and-shallow comes when you run the back-lot line straight down between the houses. The back yards are just too small.

Here, we don't change the actual lot line. But by running a *sawtooth* pattern of use easements against blank back walls (mostly on the garages), combined with privacy fencing, we concentrate the back yard space on the corner of the home where interior living spaces can face the outdoors.

Best of all, the street scene is terrific, with wide elevations on 62-foot frontage lots that defy any perception of density. Once again, I believe this is a concept that will prove its value over time in the resale market, because it does not allow cars and garages to dominate the architecture.



Plans and Elevations



**DAVID CLINGER** is president of David A. Clinger & Associates, a Golden, Colorado-based planning firm founded in 1970. In 1996, he was presented with a lifetime achievement award for land planning innovation by this magazine. Clinger has developed land plans for housing developments successfully completed in 25 states - often in the face of political opposition to density. Over 300,000 Americans now live in these communities.

## Keyhole Lot Homes

7 UNITS PER ACRE, 1,400 TO 1,900 SQUARE FEET

Beginning with zero-lot-line homes built in California in the 1980s, there's a whole generation of high-density detached housing that lives well on the inside, but the street scenes and neighborhoods are disasters. The outdoors belongs to cars, and people don't go there. How dumb is that? You live in California, where the weather is great, and end up living inside all the time?

What we're doing with *keyhole lots* is alternating narrow and wide dimensions of the homes facing the street. We sometimes call them zipper lots.

The narrow-dimension lot has its yard space concentrated at the side, the wide one in the back. In each case, the major living area of the home faces that concentrated yard. The alternation of housing forms also allows more sunlight into the yards.

The lot line runs along the zipper (as shown), between the houses, but we have use easements in place to allow the narrow house to use all of the side yard. Fencing is used as an extension of the architecture and to protect privacy. When the master bedroom is upstairs (in two-story homes), it always faces the street, to avoid windows looking down into neighbors' yards. Secondary bedrooms, with higher windows and clerestory glass, are at the back.



Site Plan  
Keyhole Lots