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Home of the Future? It's Here.

To get to the Bay Area's home of the future, you've got to get past the current housing slump. But builders and developers are thinking past the desperate-sounding incentives of cars, vacations and price cuts. "We can't keep building the houses we've been building," says San Ramon architect Robert Lee, whose firm has planned many Bay Area residential communities.

"Does a family with two kids really need a 3,200-square-foot home?" asks Vickie Nyland, president of developer Taylor Morrison's Northern California Division, also based in San Ramon. "I think nesting is what our culture is going through now."

So look for these in the next few years: smaller single-family houses, as compact as 1,500 square feet, clustered around village-style greenspaces; infill housing that revitalizes old commercial and industrial space in cities and suburbs; modernist styles for young singles and couples who want the urban buzz of "Seinfeld" and "Sex and the City." Expect to find more ecologically friendly homes with tankless water heaters, built-in solar panels and water-saving drip irrigation. Say goodbye to "volume" ceilings and media niches.

It's not all in the future. There are examples on the market right now, from the Sendera complex between Galindo Creek and the walking trail in Concord, to Bayport at the former Alameda Naval Air Station, to the Cannery Lofts in Oakland — with bike storage and a common space where all the residents can wash their dogs. Warmington Homes' Vantage development in Palo Alto has solar panels already built in.

Here's what's coming, and in some cases, ready now:

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Upgrades for home electronics

Designers are wiring houses for computer use everywhere. And with flat-screen TVs, every room can be a media room. The “new house of tomorrow” set to open at Disneyland will feature a digital lifestyle that’s already available. According to one source, you’ll be able to walk in the door after work, shout out a song title, and hear the music before you can open the refrigerator and grab a beer.

Condos with homelike and neighborhood features

Oakland’s Pacific Cannery Lofts include areas equipped for residents to wash their dogs and secure bicycle storage in a “bike lounge.” Due soon is a cafe and gallery featuring work by local artists and gourmet Blue Bottle coffee.

O’Brien Homes

Buyers are more concerned about “sustainability” to cut heating and cooling costs, water and electricity use. But builders say they’re not always willing to pay for green features. (For ideas, and Bay Area builders, check out www.BuildItGreen.org.)

Multigeneration houses

Builders are designing not just in-law apartments, but communal and private space for grandparents and extended families.

Garages in the back, not the front

Builders call it “private lane” access for parking, not back alleys. But the result is the same, shifting cars and driveways. “Nobody wants to look at garages,” says one building executive.

Fewer cookie-cutter developments

“Builders are looking for more diversity, an eclectic blend of styles” to give buyers some semblance of individuality, says Cheryl O’Connor, vice president of sales and marketing for Warmington Homes’ Northern California division and chairwoman of the Northern California Home Builders Association.

Single-family home and condominium exterior design is slower to change. Most are still vaguely Mediterranean, with developers touting variations as “Spanish colonial” or “California mission” style. It’s as if residential architecture hadn’t moved forward since the stucco-and-tile houses of

the 1920s.

But new, clustered bungalows are reviving craftsman style, making 1,500-square-foot houses look cozy rather than skimpy. The idea is to re-create something such as a traditional Berkeley neighborhood on a smaller scale. So far there are livable examples in Davis and in the Northwest, created by the aptly named Cottage Company of architects in Seattle.

The modernist revival is taking hold at Vantage and new projects in Walnut Creek, including the Mercer condominiums near the Leshner Center for the Arts and two other developments on Ygnacio Valley Road not far from the Walnut Creek BART station.

The midcentury modern look is spurred by young singles and couples who want to escape suburban style if not suburban life. It's also touted by magazines such as the hot-selling *dwell*, which describes itself as "at home in the modern world."

You'll find these new homes, condos and "duets" (duplexes with only the garages attached) in new locations.

"You're running out of these vast troves of land," says Nyland, of Taylor Morrison. "There aren't a lot of these Windemeres and Gale Ranches." Instead of those sprawling subdivisions, many developers are building on smaller, infill sites, sometimes replacing or revamping vacant commercial and industrial uses.

Among these projects is Sendera by Taylor Woodrow, just off Concord's Monument Boulevard. "We've been able to get 76 homes on a 7-acre site without it feeling too clustered or thickly built," Nyland says. It's a surprisingly expansive development — Mediterranean-style — at the end of an otherwise nondescript street, Systron Drive, beyond the elevated BART tracks.

The first resident to move into Sendera, retired Berkeley police officer Jim Hammett, wasn't sure how to find it at first, but now he enjoys the central location — he can walk to the Concord BART station. "I never thought I'd leave Martinez," Hammett says. "I don't know too many areas in Concord that I'd say 'yes' to." Among the pleasures he finds at Sendera: It's away from major streets, tucked in between Galindo Creek and the walking trail.

"I think we'll continue to see improvements in how to create really livable communities of higher

density,” says Robert Freed, president of Palo Alto-based SummerHill homes. “We operate more in the urban core areas of the Bay Area. Most of what is going to be developed in the future is higher-density, attached housing, but I expect higher levels of architectural style.” He says younger buyers are moving toward “harder-edge urban design.”

“Because land prices are so high, there’s definitely a trend toward smaller lots and higher density with shared outdoor space,” says O’Connor, the Warmington Homes vice president.

“Generation X and Y are also a big factor in our thinking,” she says. “It’s a changing demographic. They’re not so much into having a big house on a big lot. And with the price of gas, they want something they don’t have to drive far to get to.”

What about not driving at all? “Transit village” is the new buzzword in multiunit housing, although, of course, every village was initially a transit village, reached by horse or boat or on foot. Now it usually describes apartment and condo clusters around BART stations.

They’re already in place at Fruitvale, El Cerrito Del Norte and South San Francisco stations, among others. The garage at the Pleasant Hill BART station is being expanded so the current parking lots can be filled with 549 residential units, 10 live-work units and retail and office space. A kiosk near the station’s ticket machines shows an architect’s rendering of multistory structures with arched entries, square towers and diagonal, decorative roof supports. The promotional text says it’s “reminiscent of Northern California’s Spanish Colonial buildings.”

In Walnut Creek there are plans for up to 599 apartments at the BART station. Condominium projects under construction within walking distance of the station are strikingly modern. One with the moniker “55YVR” boasts a “skylounge,” a roof deck with a fireplace, canopies that look like sails, and a 360-degree panoramic view.

Another at 235 Ygnacio Valley Road, across the street from the BART station, is a five-story, 11-unit condominium project with a towering, slanting wall and roof panels. “People are going to either love it or hate it,” Mayor Gwen Regalia said as the City Council approved the design in January. She’s happy to see fresh residential design in Walnut Creek. “I’m getting a little tired of the Mediterranean castle architecture.”

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