

## **2002 Special Advertising Section – Mpls.-St. Paul Magazine**

### **Maintenance-Free Living**

*Gone are the days of cookie-cutter townhomes stacked clumsily on top of one another. Instead there are customized floor plans, super-soundproof walls and enough landscaping to make Martha Stewart jealous. Oh yeah, and you still don't have to lift a finger when it comes to yard work.*

**By John Nemo**

Kevin Roach stood on the platform of a rented moving truck this winter, looking into the garage of his Woodbury townhome and blowing on his hands to keep them warm. He and his wife, Jenny, had decided to leave their two-bedroom townhome behind because with a new baby boy, Caden, the couple found themselves in search of more space.

“It’s kind of sad,” Roach said, reflecting on the two years he and Jenny spent there. “For the first time ever, I’ll have to go buy a shovel at the store. This spring we’ll have to get a lawnmower. I haven’t raked a leaf in two years, so now I have that to look forward to this fall.”

Along with the obvious appeal of never having to shovel snow or mow the lawn, maintenance-free living has other advantages for homeowners like the Roaches. For instance, townhomes, twinhomes or villas often appreciate at the same rate (or sometimes even greater) as similar single-family homes in neighborhoods. More and more, townhomes are becoming customized by the buyer, the days of “cookie-cutter” units a distant memory. And the stereotypes of townhome life – noisy neighbors, close quarters and lousy landscaping – are being shattered on a regular basis by developers.

### **Growing Rapidly**

“We were building maintenance-free homes long before it was popular,” says Ron Clark, whose Edina construction company first started creating those types of living spaces in 1976. “But in the last 10 years it has really grown. That’s when maintenance-free living really started to gain acceptance as a desirable thing.”

Clark’s latest project, Grandview Square, features dozens of one-level townhomes being built in the Edina area.

Rick Denman, president of the Charles Cudd Signature Homes Division, says the jump in townhome sales over the past decade relates directly the maturation of America’s baby boomers.

“A lot of interest is from the empty-nester market,” says Denman, whose new property, Medina Highlands, features villa-style townhomes. “It seems to be significant market here, as baby boomers get to be 50 and 60 and their children are grown and in college or moved out. They are looking to sell their existing home and move into a maintenance-

free home that gives them more flexibility. And a lot of times they'll have another home where they live in the southern part of the world."

While the idea of being able to lock the door, head for Florida and come back to a freshly mowed lawn each spring is appealing, baby boomers aren't the only ones looking for maintenance-free living.

"We have become a much more service-oriented society," says Audrey Friedman, a realtor with Coldwell Banker Burnett who has sold townhomes in the Stillwater area for more than 10 years. "People are so busy, and as they look at the value of their time they find there are other things they'd rather be doing than mowing the lawn, for example."

That group includes everyone from young married couples buying their first home to single or divorced men and women who work long hours and don't have time for the exterior upkeep owning a home requires.

"Even younger people coming right out of college want to go into townhome living," Friedman says. "It seems to be a natural stepping stone."

With certain types of townhomes going for as low as \$125,000, entry-level buyers can afford to own a unit where the monthly mortgage payment is essentially the same as the rent they used to pay at their apartment. For baby boomers with extra money in their pockets, customized luxury townhomes in prime locations go for upwards of \$1 million.

### **A great investment**

Along with the amenities that maintenance-free living provides, the financial benefits have also proven over time to be excellent.

"Townhomes have appreciated certainly as much as most single-family homes," Clark says. "Granted, the same rules of real estate apply – you have to have a good location, a builder with a good reputation and the right development. But it is a very good investment.

"And if you look at what is coming up behind us, with all the baby boomers coming of age, the demand for maintenance-free living is going to be even greater. It's growing so much that it's becoming difficult to find new sites or land for development. Every builder in town is scrambling to find good locations for new developments."

### **New trends**

With a wider variety of people purchasing townhomes, developers have had to keep up with the new tastes and trends in a growing market.

"One thing that's important to people now is that the streets in the neighborhood have some curves, not just the old-fashioned grid pattern," Denman says. "There is more interest in how the streets loop around, and also in having some sort of water amenity around – a pond, a lake, whatever."

Developers say landscaping has also become much more important, along with increased attention to items like the stone entry monuments placed at the front of most maintenance-free living neighborhoods. Inside the buildings, floor plans have become flexible enough to suit almost any taste.

“Most of our floor plans are now real open,” Friedman says. “People have gotten away from needing the formal dining room, the formal living room. Most people want something where they can utilize all that open space, instead of having some museum-type room.”

Clark says buyers are also demanding better supplies.

“We see a lot of upgraded materials,” he says. “We get calls for things like stainless steel appliances, hardwood or marble or ceramic flooring. I’m getting more calls for quality materials than I did 10 or 15 years ago. And that’s all part of this upgrading maintenance-free living from what it was years ago into the same quality that you’ll find in an upscale, single-family home. The workmanship and the materials are the same now.”

### **Battling Stereotypes**

Critics of maintenance-free living are quick to point to an old and familiar list of complaints. The buildings are all crammed together. The common walls shared between units are so thin you can hear your neighbor sneeze. There is no variety in the floor plans.

Clark says his builders have worked hard to silence the sounds neighbors make.

“We have tested many different wall systems and decided on building two separate walls with double insulation, sound reducing channels, four layers of sheet rock and air spaces,” he says. “The air spaces help break the transmission of noise. Frankly, noise has not been a problem. We seldom – if ever – get a complaint about noise transmission.”

Denman is only too happy to address concerns about spacing issues.

“We try to provide quite a bit of open space in our communities, so that when you drive in you have a featured pond or wetland that the townhomes open up to. Everyone has his or her own private view,” he says. “Also, we’ve increased the distance between units to 35 feet between buildings, which is more space than normal. In fact, it’s more space than you have between many single-family homes. You’ll still share one common wall, but we use the best technology available to make it more sound resistant.”

Lastly, Friedman says any concerns about rigid floor plans should go out the window.

“It’s wide open,” she says. “Customizing is one of the most outstanding features we have. For instance, one of the LeGran Homes properties I sell in Stillwater, called Amundson Place, has an option for a three-car garage. Most townhomes can’t do that. The footprint might have to stay the same, but inside people can customize how things work – the

walls, the type of wood and flooring. It gets pretty specific to what the homeowner wants.”

### **What types of homes are maintenance-free?**

The type of units you’ll find depends on the price range. For entry-level homes, Clark says you’ll usually see buildings that feature anywhere from three to ten units placed together in one building.

“Typically, the more dense the units per acre, the more land costs – and ultimately the price – go down,” he says.

Moving up the ladder, you’ll find more space with twinhomes – two units placed side-by-side sharing only one common wall. Above that there are detached townhomes, often built in a villa style and usually with a generous amount of space between units.

The size of townhomes can range from those one-story villas to two or three-story units that feature three to four bedrooms. Many townhomes also come with a basement and garage.

### **What is included in maintenance-free living?**

Most neighborhoods have an association that hires companies to mow grass, rake leaves, shovel snow and do various other landscaping in the area. All exterior insurance on the homes is usually covered, and things like garbage pickup and water bills are often taken care of as well.

“The companies do a good job of keeping on top of maintenance required on the buildings,” Friedman says. “I have yet to see anything in my area really depreciate. The townhomes are really able to keep up with everything else in the market.”

### **Moving on**

Kevin Roach closed up the back of the moving truck and took one last look at his townhome, now empty inside, sun shining into a large living room window that overlooked a nearby pond and bicycle path.

“I know we’re going to need more space, but we had a great time living here,” he said. “I wish we could stay. Who knows? Maybe in 25 years we’ll be back.”