

# Builder

## HOW TO DESIGN FOR SHRINKING LOT SIZES

Higher density housing means a lack of traditional recreational space, but innovative architects and builders have found ways to do more with less.

By [Robert Hidey](#)



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

In California, escalating property values necessitate higher density residential development, even in distant suburbs. The challenge for architects and builders is how to maintain the lifestyle that home buyers have come to expect—even when land is in short supply.

While density creates a new set of challenges, it should not impair the ability to create a seamless indoor-outdoor lifestyle. Smaller lots simply force us to bring outdoor living to alternative spaces, whether it be a "paseo", or walkway, or amenity center. A rooftop, where privacy is protected, sometimes proves to be a better leisure space than the backyard of a traditional suburban home.

While it demands more creativity on our part, we have learned that the resort lifestyle successfully translates to higher density. Found spaces like rooftops are typically well received by millennial home buyers—who are not as married to the concept of a traditional backyard as previous generations.

Ten to 15 years ago, the typical density for [California](#) housing—outside central cities—was five or six lots per acre with aggressive developments at about six to seven lots per acre. However, a scarcity of land has forced developers to steadily increase densities. Without those enhanced densities, homes in Southern California would be unaffordable even for relatively affluent home buyers.

RHA's first solution to this problem was a cluster project called Aldea on the Irvine Ranch, which we designed for Cal Pacific in the early 2000s. We achieved a density of 12-13 small-lot homes per acre by eliminating primary roads from the land use plan and creating paseos to access the front doors. The project, inspired by the bungalows built around courtyards in 1920s [Los Angeles](#), was built to an appealing human scale.



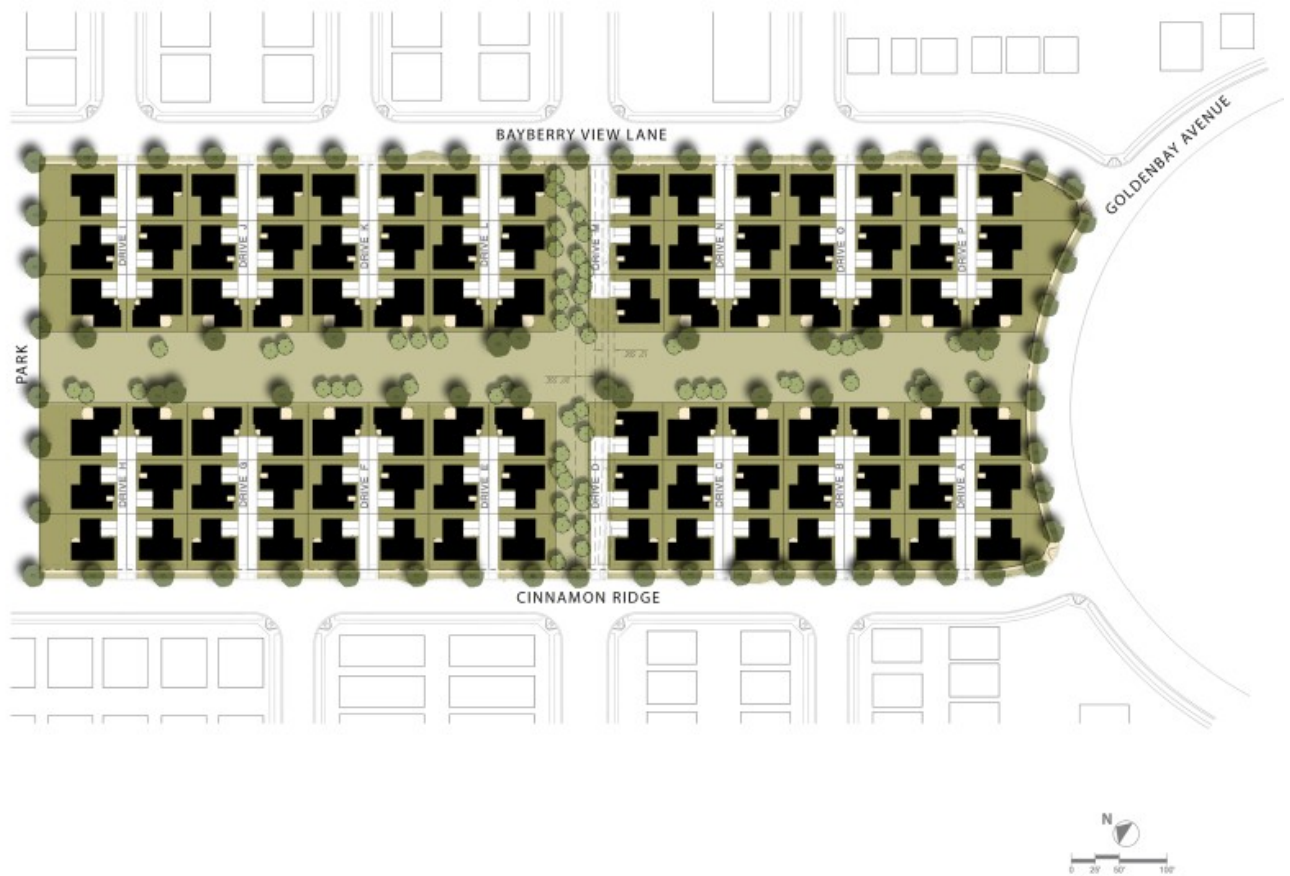
Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

The paseo, which creates a more walkable environment, gets people out of their cars and improves their quality of life. Many of these are in master-planned communities, where dedicated recreational spaces and amenity centers supplement whatever private outdoor space exists on the lots. The paseo-oriented design, which promoted an efficient use of precious land, morphed into a concept in which access to both garages and front doors for residents is provided through motor courts. Because the garage has been moved forward on the lot, this approach opens up space for a small back yard.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

A good illustration of this concept is Andorra (at 12.5 du/ac), which is a [Toll Brothers](#) project at Gale Ranch—a master-planned community in the Northern California community of San Ramos. Here, 83 single-family residences are clustered on small lots where motor courts carve out strategically located outdoor spaces, while an inviting greenbelt runs along the rear of the homes.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

At Playa Vista, which is a part of Los Angeles' booming Silicon Beach, there is strong demand for high-end housing from technology industry workers who enjoy an urban lifestyle. These buyers prefer a modern architectural style, which accommodates the indoor-outdoor lifestyle as seamlessly as Mediterranean-styled homes, but finding private open space for leisure is challenging.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

Buyers of detached single-family homes expect their own exclusive open space, but that amenity is difficult to provide when the homes are densely situated. Therefore, the only place to create a significant amount of truly private outdoor space—this is a trend that began just in the last few years—is on the upper level.

At Jewel, a luxury-priced Playa Vista neighborhood from Brookfield Residential, we created wide-open floor plans with city views through wide expanses of glass. Although the lots are small, the functionality of narrow side yards is maximized through reciprocal easements, making them well suited to intimate gatherings, dining, or barbecuing just off the great room. Jewel (at 10 du/ac), also features compact front courtyards whose slight elevation (five steps above the sidewalk) creates supplementary private outdoor space, while versatile covered decks adjoin entertainment lofts on the third floors. So in addition to fully utilizing the limited ground level spaces, these residences offer generous outdoor living space, but it is largely accommodated on the top level in lieu of an expansive yard.

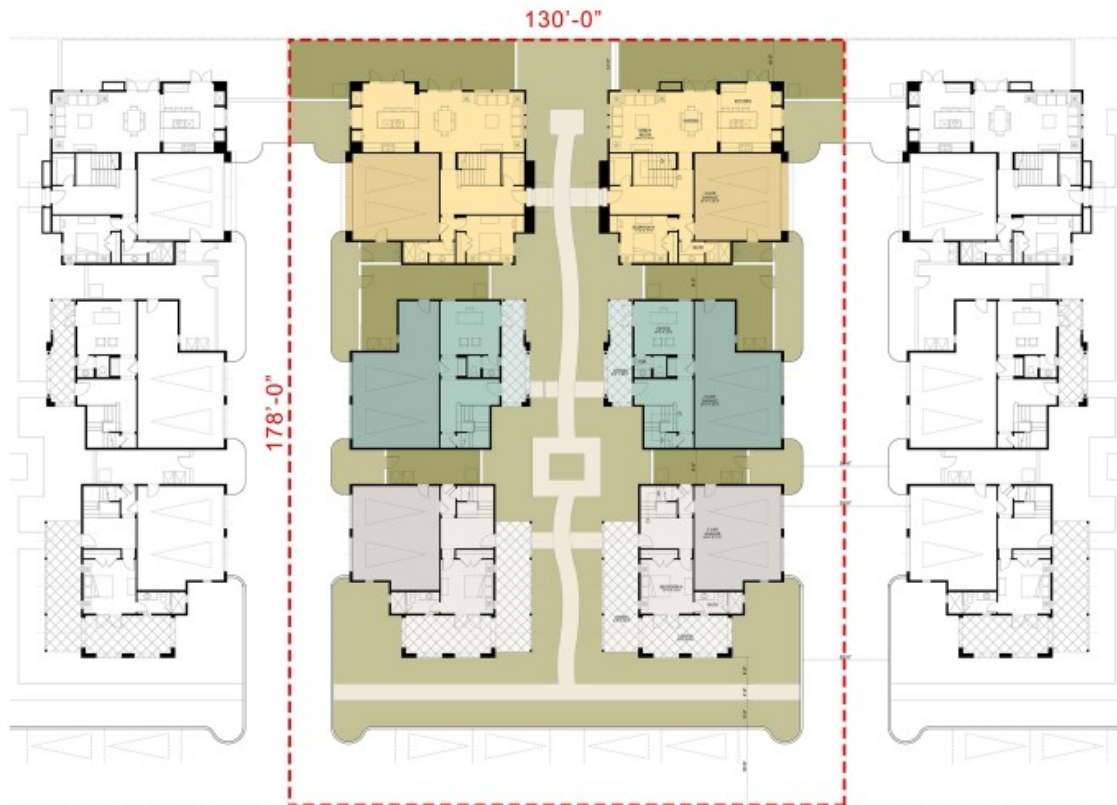
The deck-top solution provided at Jewel and sister neighborhood Marlowe is relatively new, as construction liability issues once limited the wide-scale implementation of this concept. Thanks to foresighted builders overcoming those challenges through innovative new products and construction practices, the value of this design solution is now fully embraced.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

Neighborhoods like Jewel and their lower-priced counterparts—which feature urban qualities but are still single-family opportunities—have been well-received by young families who enjoy access to shopping, dining, employment and services. Regardless of architectural style or price point, a consistent priority of RHA has been to integrate the indoors and outdoors.

At Canopy at Esencia, a project built and developed by Warmington Residential in Rancho Mission Viejo, Calif., (at 8.3 du/ac), functional outdoor space is reclaimed in several areas despite the scarcity of land. The floor plan of Canopy 2 features the reemergence of the traditional porch, sheltered by a unique wrap-around second-floor balcony, as well as a side yard adjoining a ground floor bedroom ideal for multigenerational living.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

Additionally, an opportunity for a unique rooftop space is provided on the fourth floor, offering views from the ocean to the mountains. In Canopy 3, an outdoor deck is available on the third floor, adjoining an entertainment loft in Canopy 3X. Should residents require additional opportunities for leisure outside their homes, Esencia is among the neighborhoods served by Hilltop Club—an elaborate resort-like amenity center we designed.



Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

Tustin Legacy is a massive planned community being developed by the City of Tustin on the former site of the Marine Corps Air Station. A yet-to-be-named project we are exploring with the City and Brookfield Residential offers third-floor decks reminiscent of Jewel but more affordable, at a density of about 22 units per acre.





Courtesy Robert Hidey Architects

We believe strong, uniform architectural qualities are critical to creating a sense of place in higher densities. Although the Tustin Legacy project we are designing features a striking modern aesthetic, it is partially inspired by the villages on the Greek island of Santorini, where a singular architectural concept and uniform palette reinforce a spirit of community. The Plan 3 units, where third floors consist of loft-like great rooms opening up to walk-out decks, are situated on the corners overlooking landscaped drives to enhance a genuine neighborhood ambiance despite its architectural modernism.

At RHA, we are finding new ways to integrate the outdoors, creating a resort-like lifestyle whether it is for a 40,000-square-foot estate or a 1,400-square-foot townhome, and I view my job as an architect one that's responsible for solving problems in a creative and responsible way, introducing high quality aesthetics and lifestyles—regardless of density.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### **ROBERT HIDEY**

*Robert Hidey, AIA, founder and principal of Irvine, Calif.–based Robert Hidey Architects (RHA), is known for pioneering housing trends that have enriched the residential environments of numerous communities throughout North America and the world.*