



^ KEEP OFF THE LAWN ^

*We don't cook food in our kitchens.
We don't put cars in our garages.
Now a new UCLA study reveals
that Americans never use their back
yards anymore. We're too busy
logging on to go outside. And who
has time to barbecue, anyway?*

By Carol Mithers

Photo by Amanda Friedman



ULY IN L.A. IS LIKE A COMMAND TO GO OUTSIDE:

warm afternoons of limpid, golden light, velvet sunsets streaked with red and purple. In back yards across the city, hibiscus, daylilies, roses and dahlias are in breathtaking bloom, swimming pools glisten, elaborate barbecues and gas grills gleam, heat lamps and firepots await lighting, and collections of chairs, couches with matching pillows, even rugs and daybeds are grouped around outdoor theaters, stone hearths, 16-foot-high chimneys.

And there's not a soul in sight.

Last year, when researchers for UCLA's Center on the Everyday Lives of Families closely studied the living habits of 24 dual-income, home-owning Southern California families with young children, videotaping subjects, mapping and measuring their homes, and asking them to create their own narrated video tours, they found a striking contradiction. Yards were well (sometimes elaborately) maintained, and during self-made video tours, couples showed them off, speaking of how often they used the spaces for dining and play. But during the study period, almost no one did.

More than half the families — including one whose 15,000-square-foot yard boasted a pool, patio, swing set, trampoline and baseball pitching machine — never relaxed or spent time there. In some cases, no one even stepped outside. These yards were often two and three times as large as families' homes, noted study co-authors Jeanne E. Arnold, UCLA professor of anthropology, and Ursula A. Lang, a Berkeley architect, but they received “the least hours of use per square foot ... [N]either the parents nor families as a unit are enjoying very much time of any sort, much less leisure, in these spaces.”

Arnold points out that the CELF data matches analyses drawn from a larger sample of middle-class families across the U.S. Americans spend more than \$40 billion a year to upgrade outdoor spaces — places they never actually use. The “why” lies at the intersection of culture, myth and protective self-delusion.

Historian Kenneth Jackson traces our modern suburban ideal of home surrounded by an expanse of manicured lawn back to the mid-1800s. For millennia before that, humans embraced their own versions of urban congestion, since togetherness meant security

from bandits and invaders. But later, as plumbing moved indoors and garages became attached to homes rather than erected behind them, backyard space became usable. As street noise and traffic increased, families turned toward the open-air areas behind their homes and away from their front porches.

In the 1940s, says Jeanne Arnold, “articles in magazines like *House Beautiful* were showing people how to use their yards as outdoor rooms — how to cook out, how to create privacy through visual barriers that shut out the busy world.” By the next decade, with the shift to the suburbs a dominant theme of post-war culture, a private yard was a potent symbol of the middle-class Good Life. The back yard, we were told by the commercials, the movies, the TV shows and our neighbors, was where Dad grilled burgers, Mom made martinis and the kids happily played together. For that reason, says Arnold, the possession of a back yard became “a critical part” of a middle-class family's feeling of well-being.

It still is, even if we're not out there. Says Dana Cuff, a UCLA professor of architecture and urban design, and director of cityLAB, an urban planning think tank, “we still imagine that our homes are to be used the way they were when Ward and June Cleaver laid out the diagram for us.” And although they're not — as Arnold and Lang point out, modern families typically spend their free time watching TV, practicing indoor hobbies and on the computer or playing sports away from home — we pretend.

A national consumer survey by the Propane Education and Research Council found that “home improvement projects tend to be driven by an underlying emotional need. Building or renovating outdoor rooms illustrates our need to relax and reconnect with family and friends.” Creating an elaborate, fabulous (and

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expensive) back yard often “is a fantasy,” says Santa Monica landscape architect Joseph Marek, who finds the CELF findings “shocking, but not a surprise. People watch home and garden shows on TV and think ‘wouldn’t it be great to have that.’ They imagine ‘if we have a wonderful space in the yard, we’ll be out there more.’ But the reality is that everyone is too busy.”

Is such self-deception a bad thing? Maybe not, says Cuff. “If I have only five minutes to sit on the patio chair, maybe it’s

more satisfying that it’s not a broken-down piece of plastic. If the scarcest commodity for families is time, you intensify the few moments you have with special things.”

“Even if you don’t use the yard, if it’s done in a way that’s very pleasing to you, you can get enjoyment just sitting at the breakfast table and looking out,” says Eric Stodder, a Laguna Beach landscape designer and builder. “It adds some goodness to the day.”

On the other hand, part of the reason

so many families don’t have time for leisure is that we’re working frantically to finance the massive amounts of consumer goods we buy — and that includes the \$599 outdoor recliner, “impervious to the elements” Santa Barbara sectional (\$3,890) or Outdoor Room with 65-inch pop-up plasma TV, fire pit and three weatherproof recliners — suggested retail price, \$60,000.

“We’re on a treadmill, and I think it’s crazy,” Arnold notes. “Families really didn’t seem to get this — or they’re so busy they don’t have time to think about it.”

In the end, our beautiful, empty yards have become one more casualty of life in a Digital Age. They have become, in fact, just like so many of our stainless-steel, professional quality, and equally unused kitchens: elaborate, rather sad, set pieces crafted for the lives we wish we had, rather than those we actually do. ■