



# Inner beauty

## Home buyers find middle ground between Chicago and distant suburbs

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**When it came time to buy their first home, Chicago residents Tracy Turner-Ojeda and husband Francisco Ojeda looked for a place in the city. But after a frustrating year of searching, they gave up.**

**"What you get for what you can afford was an issue," Turner-Ojeda said. "What we found in the city didn't really meet our needs."**

**So they looked in the suburbs.**

**They began their search by heading northward, to Antioch and beyond. There, she noted, "you can get a very inexpensive home--but it's way up in the boonies."**

**Finally, they found a place in between.**

**When the couple found their three-bedroom townhouse at Trafalgar Square in Morton Grove, it didn't take them long to see the inner beauty of this inner-ring suburb.**

**"We fell in love with it," said Turner-Ojeda, a Skokie school teacher. "It's close to the city, close to our jobs, and the Metra [rail service] is right there. There's also a forest preserve right next to our development. I work with some people who have lived in Morton Grove many, many years and are very happy there."**

The Ojedas are among many who are buying new homes in older, inner-ring suburbs from Niles to Oak Lawn.

These communities have long been conspicuously absent from the dance cards of builders developing new housing in Chicago, on

the fringes of suburbia, or in upscale suburbs around the metro area.

But the inner-ring suburbs now appear to have plenty of residential development taking place, and buyers like the Ojedas couldn't be happier about it.

If there's an overarching reason for the growth of inner-ring development, it is location, said Steve Hovany, president of Schaumburg-based Strategy Planning Associates, a real estate planning firm.

Blue-collar and industrial suburbs on or near the fringes of Chicago's borders once were overlooked by builders and buyers.

But today, "you'll find any place with a good close-in location is under pressure for development," Hovany said, adding that "if the alternative is to be way past Huntley," inner-ring communities look appealing.

Good location means more than being closer to everything the Magnificent Mile, the Loop and the lakefront have to offer.

Employment studies indicate the O'Hare area, rather than downtown Chicago, is now the hub of the metropolitan area's job base.

"So if you move to one of these near-in suburbs, you're close to work, in a relatively well-serviced community, and you're also close to downtown," Hovany said.

For those who savor a more urban lifestyle, reverse commuting may also factor into the geographic appeal, said Tim Anderson, president of Northfield's Focus Development, which is building The Residences at the Grove in Forest Park.

Those who live in Forest Park but work in, say, Oak Brook have a much easier commute than they would from downtown or a Near North Side neighborhood, he said.

"And you're not sacrificing your access to the city or urban lifestyle," Anderson added.

Yet another geographic issue affecting inner-ring suburbs is the desire of many longtime residents of nearby communities to stay near friends, places of worship and favorite stores, yet downsize into more affordable townhouses and condominiums. The new building taking place in many inner-ring villages lets them do just that.

**In a sense, developers are embracing areas that were there all along, but were bypassed in previous years, said Leigh Nevers, vice president of marketing with Hoffman Estates-based Lennar Chicago, which is building the Trafalgar Square development in Morton Grove.**

**"Ten years ago, there were these little pockets that no one ever did anything with," she said. "Development continued to push out, away from where people are working or going to school. But these pockets are more conveniently located, so builders are coming in and developing them. It's a better, more convenient location."**

Also contributing to the resurgence in interest in the inner ring is that close-in suburbs are mature municipalities founded and largely built out decades ago.

That means buyers don't have to be pioneers, as they might be in villages that a few years earlier were cornfields. Retail and service businesses, park district facilities, churches and schools already are in place and waiting for newcomers, Hovany noted.

Another factor is the interest among recent immigrants in moving to the suburbs. Bucking the urban-focused ways of their predecessors, who often spent a generation or two in ethnic

enclaves in the city before venturing to the green fields of suburbia, today's recent immigrants are more likely to head right to the suburbs.

"A lot of those close-in suburbs are really, really popular with different ethnic groups, whether Polish, Hispanic or Russian," Hovany said. "They're basically urban people, and these suburbs are their middle ground. They get the flavors of both the city and the areas farther out."

It's also worth noting that many inner-ring suburbs were founded and developed after World War II. Many were built out from border to border during a single decade--the 1950s. Typical new homes of that era were three-bedroom, one-bath ranches that 50 years later are essentially obsolete.

"So if you're good with your hands and good with tools, you can get them at a pretty good price and turn them into more modern-style homes," Hovany said. "You finish the basement, figure out how to add a second bathroom, and add on to the back."

Because inner-ring suburbs are hamstrung by a dearth of open land, builders are confronted with finding ways to bring new housing to compact parcels. Some have done so by providing a mix of condominiums and townhomes.

A good example is Thatcher Woods at the corner of Thatcher and North Avenues in Melrose Park. The development combines 120 condos in two buildings with eight three-story townhomes, six two-story townhomes and four two-story duplexes, said Ted Mazola, president and co-founder of Chicago's New West Realty Group, which represents Thatcher Woods.

Thatcher Woods condo buyers include everyone from first-time buyers to empty-nesters leaving big older homes for smaller new ones nearby. Townhome buyers include those who couldn't find a townhouse under \$400,000 in the city, and therefore appreciate the \$350,000 starting



prices of Thatcher Woods' maintenance-free models.

Buyers also are enticed by new homes in a village with long-standing roots. Said Mazola: "There's a sense of established community, as opposed to where the trees are one-inch thick--if there are trees."

**Another inner-ring development is Trafalgar Square, on Lincoln Avenue just four blocks from the Morton Grove Metra station. Trafalgar Square features 113 maintenance-free, 1,646-square-foot town homes priced from the low \$400,000s.**

**Trafalgar Square buyers like the fact they're moving to a new home in a mature suburb, Nevers said. "When you get out into some of these far, far west and south suburbs, there's so much development of community infrastructure to be done. These more mature communities are already built up ... You're in an area that's already a high-traffic area."**

**In addition to being able to walk to Metra trains, Trafalgar Square residents can shop in nearby Skokie, Glenview and Niles, as well as along Morton Grove's own Dempster Street commercial corridor. About 20 percent of Morton Grove's land mass is maintained by the Cook County Forest Preserve.**

The Residences at The Grove in Forest Park features 140 one- to three-bedroom condominiums and 60 three-bedroom town homes, being built in two phases, Anderson said. Prices for the condos range from the \$200,000s to the low \$400,000s, while the town homes are priced from around \$350,000 to about \$440,000.

"Forty percent of our buyers are from [neighboring] Oak Park or River Forest," Anderson said. "They want to stay local, but they want to downsize. We're getting a mixture of older buyers and younger buyers."

The Residences at The Grove is accessible to the CTA Blue Line into the city, and to the adjacent Eisenhower Expressway. Anderson also believes many of the buyers want a suburban lifestyle with urban influences.

"These are not the sleepy suburbs they once were. They're not your mother's suburbs. At 10:30 at night, there are people on the street, activity in the restaurants. There is activity that's making these suburbs more attractive places to live."

As the Chicago area pushes farther and farther out, even a suburb like Des Plaines qualifies as an inner-ring community. There, Newport Builders' Stone Gate Condominiums offers 264 units across four seven-story buildings on a seven-acre site with lots of green space. The condos, priced from the \$190,000s to the mid-\$300,000s, are a six-minute walk from the Metra service, says Mary Lane, president of Alexander Lane Realty in Des Plaines, the sales agent for the development.

The lure of Des Plaines? "The same thing that attracted me when I moved here 20 years ago," Lane said. "I can be anywhere I need to be from Des Plaines in 30 minutes or less," she noted, adding affordable prices sweeten the deal.

"With gas prices going higher and higher all the time, people are realizing they can move into these inner-ring suburbs, be close to the city, and they don't have to break the bank to find some housing. There is moderately priced housing families can afford."

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