



Marni Jameson

Welcome to the Parade of Moans

By Marni Jameson

This is truly a home where it will be unnecessary to keep up with the Joneses. You will be the Joneses!

-- Excerpt from a home promotion at the 2005 Parade of Homes

Every year a luxury home tour in my state entices throngs of visitors to desire more house than they can afford and break the commandment about not coveting other people's stuff. The Parade of Homes is orchestrated by the local Home Builders Association to foster feelings of inadequacy and greed. I wouldn't miss it.

The formula is brilliant: Take a bunch of Americans, whose appetite for consumption is insatiable. Add an interactive environment where the Wow! factor ignites the want factor. Combine that with easy lending options, and presto! The American Dream – super-sized. (This year's tour featured homes ranging from a measly 5,700 to 9,900 square feet in size, and a paltry \$1.6 to \$2.7 million in price.)

It all starts with developers who find a huge chunk of undeveloped land where heretofore only prairie dogs, bull snakes, coyotes and scorpions called home. They give the place a fancy name like Stink Bug Ridge, add a golf course, a recreation center, and a gazillion lots for sale. Then a pack of custom builders, architects, landscapers and interior designers work like bees on caffeine to create six outsized, lavish homes. Besides trying to outdo each other, they design with one goal: Cause an epidemic of jaw dropping, which can, in certain susceptible types, lead to dough dropping.

To generate demand, the group sells tickets to voyeurs who pay to tour these decked homes, and leave feeling overwhelmed, unimaginative and poor. I know I did. That's why this year, as I toured the Parade of Homes, I thought of a few other names for it.

Parade of Moans: The moan effect occurs in every home. Women, mostly, turn a corner into, say a kitchen, or a master, and moan with desire, like a B actress in blue movie. Translated their moans mean: "I really want this."

Parade of Groans: This moan causes their mates, who aren't far behind, to respond, as they are biologically wired to do, with an equal and opposite groan. In this context, groans mean: "Oh no, she likes it. Now I either must get a third job to buy her this, or feel like an under-performing male schlump because I can't."

Parade of Loans: This moan-groan reaction leads to the fortuitously located booth in the sales tent, where smiling people wearing lots of cologne and Hawaiian shirts offer smelling salts and loans. These lenders are eager to help you finance a new home or upgrades to your existing home, neither of which you thought you needed until all the moaning and groaning started.

I'm not complaining. Heck, I went to this year's Parade two days in a row. I moaned *and* groaned. But I've been through enough tours to get a teeny bit of perspective. When you really look beyond the Wow factor, many of the homes' over-the-top features are nice, but some are just plain ridiculous. Here's my takeaway:

- No one, I don't care how bad the obesity epidemic is in America, needs a shower as big as a carwash.
- No one, I don't care how much he eats, needs two built-in, outdoor grills.
- No one needs four outdoor patios, one for every compass direction.
- No one needs an auto turnstile in his garage. (These let you to pull your Ferrari in, press a button, and turn the car 180 degrees on a large turntable, so you never have to back out of your garage.)
- No one -- I don't care how socially inept -- needs a plasma television in every room. One home actually had three plasma TVs behind the bar, so one could watch three stations at once. Just the thought gives me a headache.
- I did, however, like the disappearing walls and vanishing doors. When the weather is nice, these walls just roll out of sight for transitional living. Now that's cool.

Being the brilliant marketers they are, these builders also catered to tomorrow's buyer. They placed a series of playhouses at the end of the tour, and held a raffle. My youngest daughter eyed the homes longingly, peering in the little windows just two-feet off the ground.

She moaned.

I explained that our chance of winning was about as likely as our getting a golden ticket to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. But, since the money was going to help kids with cancer, we bought 10 raffle tickets.

The night the sponsors were to call the winners, I'd forgotten all about the contest. But my daughter hadn't. At bedtime, she looked sad.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We didn't win," she whispered.

I hug her. House heartbreak starts so young.

"Who do you think won?" she asked.

"Hard to know," I said, "probably the Joneses."

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