

## **LA region's garages suffering identity crisis, say UCLA researchers**

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Forget hot tubs beckoning sybaritic adults, garages brimming with impressive cars and families frolicking on verdant lawns. From their clutter-strewn garages to their mostly lovely but abandoned yards, busy Southern California parents who own their homes rarely use residential outdoor spaces for the purposes for which they were designed, said a UCLA anthropologist who participated an in-depth study of how the average dual-income family really lives in Los Angeles.

"Middle class families in Southern California don't live the way you might expect," said Jeanne Arnold, an anthropologist with UCLA's Center for the Everyday Lives of Families and a UCLA professor of anthropology. "Most parents in dual-income families never spend leisure time in their yards, their children play outside much less than expected and most cars can't fit in garages because they're too full of clutter from the house."

Five years ago, Arnold and a team of researchers set out to follow 32 families, all with young children, and with each parent holding a full-time job. For four full days, Arnold's team tracked these families at home, from the moment they rose to the moment they went to bed, scrupulously documenting the ways they used their homes, yards and time. In addition to videotaping family members at home during the four days, including weekends, the research team recorded the activities and whereabouts of each family member in the home at 10-minute intervals. They produced photos and floor plans of the houses and yards, and family members made self-narrated tours of their homes. The team

accumulated so much information that just processing the records took more than a month per family. The first "material culture" analysis of these records will appear in the March 2007 issue of the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*.

Despite the fact that contemporary Americans now control the largest amount of private space per person in the history of urban civilization, the team documented what Arnold calls "a storage crisis" among the first 24 of 32 families studied.

"From construction materials to excess furniture and toys, storage of material goods has become an overwhelming burden for most middle-class families," said Arnold.

"We found items blocking driveways, cluttering backyard corners and spilling out of garages," said Ursula Lang, an architect in Berkeley, Calif., and a study co-author.

The trend is fueling an "identity crisis" for the region's garages, which rapidly are being converted into multipurpose storage spaces for household goods or people, "pushing cars once and for all out to the driveways and streets," the study warned.

"Rarely do cars see the inside of the garage," Arnold noted.

Just six — or one-quarter — of the families tracked were able to use their garage in the traditional manner by parking at least one car there regularly. And of those, only three families parked both of the parents' vehicles in the garage. The other three families were able to squeeze just a single car into the garage before turning the remainder of the space over to storage.

About one-third of the families had converted their garages in part or in whole into living spaces. But almost every garage that was still

recognizable as a garage was "dominated by, if not overtaken by," storage needs, the study stated. In two-thirds of these cases, researchers characterized the density of items stored in these garages as "high." The only family that did not use its garage for storage of some sort was upper-middle-class and owned a large home with two generously sized interior storage spaces.

"The findings show that about 75 percent of middle-class Los Angeles homeowners use garages in ways that preclude parking cars there," Arnold said. "This pattern differs a bit in the harsher climates of the East and Midwest, where families more often protect cars from foul weather and where many homes have basements that can absorb some of a household's demand for storage. But increasingly we think the pattern may emerge there, too"

Ironically, much of the garage-stored material goes unused. Half of the families never even visited the garage spaces during the study, and more than half of those who did spent 10 minutes or less among the possessions sequestered at such a considerable trade-off. The routine raised flags for researchers.

"Trapped in an energy-draining work-and-spend cycle, many young dual-earner families seem to fuel their stress and frustration by buying more possessions than their homes can absorb, adding to their debt and routinely conscripting crowded garage spaces to function as chaotic storage rooms," Arnold said.

If garages were overused, the yards of middle-class homes had the opposite problem. While the average backyard was two times the size of the homes' interior, and families often invested in special features and carefully maintained the spaces, use was limited.

Adults were barely recorded in their backyards during the observed

times, and when they did step through their backdoors, they did chores. In fact, 13 of the 24 families — or slightly more than half — did not spend any leisure time at all in the backyard during the four days of observation. This finding included both parents and children. Interestingly, researcher logged little or no use of the priciest improvements (pools, play sets, and formal decks and patio spaces). Parents in only four families — or one in six — spent an hour or more eating or playing outside with their children or visitors. Children didn't fare much better. In only six of the 24 families — 25 percent — did youngsters spend an hour or more in the backyard during the four days.

"Relaxing in the backyard and extended play by children in the yard may be cherished ideals, but they are rarely achieved among today's time-stressed, electronically oriented families," Arnold said. "The harried week of the dual-earner middle-class family — with job, commute, keeping up the home, and structured activities for children on many afternoons and weekends — allows little time for leisure outdoors."

Front yards were no more popular. Beyond fleeting exchanges between neighbors or brief instances of children playing with a bike or ball in the front, 20 of the 24 participating families spent no time to speak of in their front yards. Only one family socialized on the front porch, a once familiar activity in small-town America.

When families did linger in the front yard, they mostly carried out chores, such as planting, weeding and pruning. And children who did venture into the front yard tended not to play on the lush lawns that the families went to great lengths to keep up. Against expectation, little ones gravitated toward paved surfaces.

"Most kids' play in the front is on asphalt driveways, streets or concrete sidewalks," Arnold said. "There were only a few instance of play with tree-swings or bats and balls that carried onto the front lawns. Indeed,

the manicured lawns and formally landscaped areas in front of quite a few of the houses seem to actively discourage play and other rambunctious activity. They seemed to invite passersby to admire the owner's good taste and conformity with neighborhood ideals."

Together with the low backyard use, the front yard patterns set off alarms for the researchers.

"By any measure of intensity of use of middle-class homes, yard spaces receive the least hours of use per square foot," Arnold said. "But the disparity between the intensity of use of middle-class homes and the yard space that surrounds them has probably never been as great as it is today. More and more, the outdoor spaces at home do not seem to serve as a regular outlet for the release of the stresses and strains of daily life, especially for younger dual-earner parents."

To see an online version of the study, go to [dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10834-006-9052-5](https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10834-006-9052-5)

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