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Here's a different view on views

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—Every country-property buyer seems to want views. The longer, the more unobstructed, the closer to 360 degrees, the more buyers are willing to pay.

I, too, once highly valued big views. I'm not sure I do anymore.

Views are, of course, soothing and inspiring.

My second thoughts about them are practical and environmental, because each of these concerns is connected umbilically to my wallet. How so? Older view-oriented housing may come with problems that buyers don't see or understand even though they're hidden in plain view. Buyers can find themselves paying a premium for grandeur and then paying again for unexpected repairs and higher-than-expected maintenance. And then there are the costs of building from scratch on top of your own Matterhorn, or any of its slightly squattier cousins.

**Practical considerations:** Views, apart from those on water or treeless plains, involve elevation. They are usually purchased in the coin of long, winding uphill roads. These are expensive to construct and a bother to maintain. In bad weather, defined however you want, they can be dangerous.

Big non-water views are usually found in somewhat remote places. Finagling heavy construction trucks up roads that are long, steep, switch-backed or slick from water or snow will produce at least one super-sized, heavy-duty version of Mr. Toad's wild ride.

These rarely have Disney-happy endings.

The biggest non-water views are generally found on ridge lines, knobs and mountainsides. Building infrastructure to and in these places is always complicated and expensive, particularly septic systems, wells, and grid-based electricity. House foundations, windows and roofs may need to be "heavied up" in design and materials.

Consider the extreme example of Hitler's Eagle's Nest near Berchtesgaden in Bavaria. This chalet was constructed on a rock promontory at more than 6,000 feet, accessed by a 3.9-mile-long road up the mountain. Its full-circle view cost the equivalent of 150 million in 2007 Euros as well as the lives of a number of construction workers.

Elevated sites are more windy and colder than lower spots. Stouter, more

costly construction techniques, particularly with roofs and windows, are advisable for structures subject to high winds. Damage may become a rite of spring. I know of one second home that lost its roof three times in ten years; the new owner was told not to build there, but views triumphed. And, after all, what did locals with seven generations of experience know anyway? Heating such places is usually more expensive, because of height, exposure and wind chill.

Many high, exposed places are prone to lightning strikes. I have not forgotten lying belly to dirt many years ago at a building site on a wooded knob as bolts struck three times within 100 feet of where I was searching for the nearest ant tunnel.

When houses have 360-degree-type views, some architects have found that residents may take them for granted over time. Familiarity doesn't breed contempt, but it may push background further back. A few architects recommend consciously limiting in-house access to big vistas as a way to keep them special.

**Environmental considerations:** One major concern with long-view housing is the degradation of the local viewshed when houses and condos stick up from ridge lines like defiant nails.

The three nails in my neighborhood always snag my eye. Buildings on high open land are snaggy than on wooded sites at the same elevation.

A number of communities have adopted ordinances to restrict hillside and ridge-line development for reasons of aesthetics, erosion and impact on adjoining property values. ([www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/greendev/codes.shtml](http://www.smartcommunities.ncat.org/greendev/codes.shtml); go to Hillside Preservation District under Open Space.)

Waterfront properties -- ocean, lake and rivers -- provide views, but raise different types of environmental issues and costs. Well water and septic systems around lakes can become a continuing mess where each lot is responsible for installing and maintaining them. Rivers flood and oceans surge as we know, but sometimes forget.

Ocean views -- obtained from new houses adjacent to the waterline -- are increasingly problematic owing to costs and regulatory controls. Rising water levels and beach erosion can take shore-front houses with great views. Setbacks and prohibitions on sea walls now regulate new shore-line development in most states. Second-home buyers need to understand the risks they buy in older housing close to water views.

As wonderful as it is to sit on a beachfront deck and bathe in the joy of a

sunrise or sunset, it's probably an experience that future shore housing will not offer.

Are long views from elevation and over water anti-green? Not necessarily, but it depends on how the site lays and how it's developed. Many big-view sites can be developed badly legally—and are. They can also be developed with sensitivity.

Over the years, I've come to value more humble views and houses that are tucked into their sites rather than standing at attention with their faces into the wind. Maybe this is just a matter of getting older and not being able to see as far, in both senses.

Some anthropologists believe that great views invoke our deepest evolutionary needs—we feel safer up high where we can scan for both enemies and prey. A lot of us believe that views are empowering.

On the other hand, I've seen big views encourage emotion-based impulse buying, which benefits sellers not buyers.

I've found shorter views from houses in woods wear better with me than longer views from exposed sites

Big views, I think, inspire big thoughts and expand our sense of what's possible. That's good. Lesser views simply ask us to work a little harder at self-improvement.

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