

Families Add 3rd Generation to Households

By MIREYA NAVARRO

Tess Crescini keeps trying to limit her roommates to her fiancé and her dog, but so far she has failed miserably.

At the moment, Ms. Crescini, 51, and her fiancé are sharing her four-bedroom house in San Jose, Calif., with two of her three adult sons, a daughter-in-law, a 3-year-old granddaughter and a brother who comes and goes. Exorbitant housing costs, layoffs and children who yearn for family togetherness have coalesced to make her the head of a multigenerational household.

In a society where the most common type of household is led by those who live alone and where the scattered family is almost a cultural institution, many grandparents, adult children and grandchildren are gathering to live under the same roof.

The last census showed these "multigenerational households" — defined as those of three or more generations — growing faster than any other type of housing arrangement.

The number of multigenerational households is still relatively small: 4.2 million, or 4 percent of all types. But they grew by 38 percent from 1990 to 2000, and professionals in real estate and the building industry say the trend has accelerated since then.

Architects, developers and others in the industry are responding with home designs and planned communities that offer features suited for the different generations. At builder trade shows this year, model homes with names like Reality House have for the first time specifically catered to multigenerational living. Bedroom suites are designed with private entrances and porches, halls are wider to accommodate wheelchairs, and light switches are lower so they can be reached both by those in the wheelchairs and by children.

There are also bigger kitchens for social networking, as well as extra storage space for belongings that now range from toys to grandma's china.

"You see a lot more people dedicating a portion of their homes to loved ones," said Carlos Elenes of EBTA Architects in Irvine, Calif., who specializes in high-end homes and has worked on projects for adult children housing their parents and for grandparents sharing their home with children and grandchildren.

But fancy, multimillion-dollar homes are not the norm when generations choose to live together. Census officials say multigenerational families are most common in states like California, where the high cost of housing forces families to double up, and in states where high rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing lead to home sharing by the mother, her children and her parents.

A variety of cultural factors also draw and keep relatives together. Multigenerational living, especially those in which grandparents care for their grandchildren, have long been common in Asian and Hispanic countries, and the arrangement is popular among immigrants from those nations. Also driving the trend are — who else? — active baby boomers who want to be involved in the lives of their offspring and who see little appeal in flying off to a Sun Belt retirement in isolation.

"There's a financial aspect, but also people are realizing the importance of staying connected to their roots," said Donna M. Butts, executive director of Generations United, which promotes interaction among generations. "Families have been scattered for so many years, and there's a reversal of that trend."

Sixty-two percent of multigenerational households are led by the first generation — that is, the grandparents.

At a time when she would otherwise have been downsizing, Ann Bristow, 66, bought a two-bedroom condo in downtown Seattle in 2004 so she could share it with her 36-year-old daughter and 20-month-old granddaughter.

Ms. Bristow, who is divorced, said she had been retiring from her job as a university librarian in Indiana just as her youngest daughter became a single mother. They moved to Seattle, where Ms. Bristow's other daughter lives with her own family. Ending up together in one apartment, the multigen grandmother said, "was just a very natural move for me."

Ms. Bristow takes care of the baby part of the week while her daughter works as a teacher. "I love small children," she said. "I absolutely enjoy taking care of her. It's not a sacrifice."

The arrangement is also driven by finances: she is helping her daughter, who has gone back to school for a second master's degree and is saving money to settle down on her own.

Ms. Bristow said many of her contemporaries did not seem to understand. They view retirement as a time to pamper themselves, not to take on new responsibilities.

"Playing golf was not my vision," she said. "I envisioned myself very involved with family."

For those who have decided to regroup, family togetherness can create strains, prompting a need to navigate old relationships in a new way. It means establishing ground rules for cooking and cleaning, adapting to one another's tastes in movies and music, and being mindful not to usurp roles. In Ms. Bristow's case, mother and daughter seem to have fallen into their routines smoothly, and Ms. Bristow says her main concern is that her granddaughter knows who her mother is.

"That's a very important thing, that the emotional attachments and the authority are as clear as one can make them," she said.

Each household has its own tensions and rewards. Ms. Crescini, a real estate agent in San Jose, said she had forfeited two bedrooms, including one she had planned to use as a workout room, to her sons. And she misses "alone time" to write poetry and enjoy privacy with her fiancé, whom she plans to marry next month. "Try having a wild night with a house full of people," she said.

On the plus side, Ms. Crescini said, the family eats meals and watches movies together, her daughter-in-law is helping her coordinate her wedding, and her sons and brother have been busy building her a gazebo, a deck and an island grill station in the backyard.

"I go to Curves in the mornings," she said, "and I tell the ladies about my daily grind, and they say: 'You should count your blessings. Some children don't even visit for Thanksgiving' "

But "ideally," she said, "I'd like my sons to be independent."

Her oldest son, Michael Hovland, 29, has a slightly different wish. "Ideally," he said, "I'd like to buy a house right next to hers."

Mr. Hovland said he was glad that his daughter was growing up with her extended family and that he could benefit from the wisdom of "an elder who's been there and done that" in day-to-day matters.

"Family is, like, everything," he said. "If I had millions and millions of dollars, I'd buy land and have everybody live on it."

That would be a return to the custom of the 19th century, before the decline of farming and the exodus of adult children from their parents' homes to follow jobs, said Steven Ruggles, a historian who studies changes in the American family and directs the Minnesota Population Center, a research organization at the University of Minnesota.

Many social scientists, Dr. Ruggles said, also argue that Social Security contributed to the erosion of the multigenerational household, by enabling the elderly to afford living independently. He said the percentage of people over 65 living with their children dropped steadily from 1850 to 1990, when it began inching up.

Now, although multigenerational households are more common among low-income families, architects and builders are designing multimillion-dollar homes that cater to the more wealthy among this niche market, and owners of existing homes are adding 5,000 to 6,000 square feet to accommodate relatives.

In the market below \$1 million, some real estate agents are seeing families with multiple wage-earners combining incomes and down payments to get the bigger house.

"When you show these homes, you have this large caravan" of up to 10 people, said Yvonne Rosas-Petty, a sales associate with Century 21 in Arcadia, Calif., a city with a large Asian population where multigenerational homes sell for \$700,000 and up.

In some multigenerational households, the parent-child roles have been reversed.

Julie Kroloff, a 49-year-old head of household, moved her multigenerational family ? a daughter, 8; a son, 7; and her 84-year-old mother ? to a five-bedroom house in Four Corners, a new development in Dutchess County, N.Y., with planned amenities suited to more than one generation, including a general store, a pool, a gym and a meeting center.

Her mother helped take care of the children and opened up a whole new world to them, said Ms. Kroloff, who does management consulting for public works programs. Thanks to her, she said, they have watched old movies like "Arsenic and Old Lace" and learned to make popcorn the old-fashioned way, in corn oil in a pot.

But Ms. Kroloff also had to ask her mother to refrain from eating junk food in front of the children, to turn down the television when she watches past their bedtime and to give her space to spend time with her children and with friends who visit.

"You don't want her to tell stories about how constipated you were as a child," she said.

Since late last year, when her mother was found to have Alzheimer's disease, a home care attendant has taken care of grandmother and grandchildren alike.

Many of the arrangements are by nature temporary. Children grow up, grandparents die. In Seattle, Ms. Bristow said she and her daughter expected that they would probably part ways by the time her granddaughter begins school.

But, then again, they may end up back together.

"If I'm ill or unable to take care of myself," Ms. Bristow said, "she might invite me to move in with her."