

forum news

Reprinted from July/August 2002 Forum News. © National Trust for Historic Preservation

Taming the Teardown Trend

by Adrian Scott Fine and Jim Lindberg

A disturbing new pattern of demolitions is approaching epidemic proportions in many historic neighborhoods across America:

- In two neighborhoods just outside Dallas, Tex., more than 1,000 historic early 20th-century homes have been purchased, bulldozed, and sent to the dump, making way for the construction of luxury homes of up to 10,000 square feet each. A new local preservation group is attempting to slow the pace of demolitions.

- In Denver, Colo., some 200 homes—most of them brick bungalows from the 1920s and 1930s—were demolished last year and replaced with stucco-clad houses three times their size. Neighborhood groups are clamoring for protection.

- In Rancho Mirage, Calif., a museum-quality, 5,000-square-foot home designed in 1962 by famed architect Richard Neutra was demolished without warning by its new owners, who plan to build a much larger new house. Local residents and preservationists across the nation are appalled.

- Even the work of Frank Lloyd Wright is at risk. In the

close-in Chicago suburb of Bannockburn, a spacious house designed by Wright in 1956 was purchased last year by an owner who announced plans to demolish it and build new. Fortunately, the ensuing public outcry resulted in the sale of the house to a preservation-minded buyer.

What is behind this rush to demolish historic houses? It is the teardown trend, a new real estate development practice that is spreading like wildfire through historic urban and close-in suburban neighborhoods across the country. *Forum News* first reported on this concern in its April/May 2001 issue (“Taming the Monster House” by Pratt Cassity and Anthony Veerkamp). The National Trust has now documented more than 100 communities in 20 states that are experiencing significant numbers of teardowns, and that number is climbing fast.

The term “teardown” refers to the practice of demolishing an existing house—often an older home located in an attractive historic neighborhood—to make way for the construction of a dramatically larger new house on the same site. While teardowns are sometimes appro-



appropriate, the National Trust is specifically concerned about teardowns that are occurring in historic neighborhoods, whether they are designated as historic or are potentially eligible for designation at the federal, state, or local levels.

The most obvious impact of teardowns in a historic neighborhood is the loss of

In Ocean City, N. J., entire neighborhood blocks of late 19th- and early 20th-century bungalows and cottages have been lost as the result of more than 300 recent demolitions. Local preservationists are advocating for tools to stop further teardowns. Photo courtesy of Citizens for Historic Preservation (CHiP).

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The character, cohesiveness, and stability of older neighborhoods can be undermined when smaller houses are replaced by massive structures (like this one in Dallas) that disregard the styles, scale, and materials of existing buildings. Photo courtesy of Marcel Quimby.

older houses that have long contributed to the look and livability of their community. Perhaps even more damaging are the replacements for these homes: massive, out-of-scale structures that completely ignore the historic character of the existing neighborhood.

Shoe-horning massive, suburban-style homes into historic neighborhoods is not a good fit. Typically measuring from 3,000 to 10,000 square feet, these structures overwhelm neighboring homes and threaten the very qualities that make historic neighborhoods so attractive in the first place. The large new houses often seem like stand-alone developments, dominated in front by driveways and three- and four-car garages, and oriented to private interior spaces while eschewing community-friendly features such as front porches and sidewalks.

Incrementally, as the number of teardowns increases, the overall character and

charm of a historic neighborhood begins to disappear, replaced by a hodgepodge of boxy new mansions and forlorn-looking older homes. Neighborhood livability is diminished when mature trees and landscaping are removed, backyards are eliminated, and sunlight is blocked by towering new structures built up to the property lines. Community economic and social diversity is reduced when modest, affordable homes are replaced with structures costing three times as much. Finally, any sense of neighborhood continuity and stability is lost when teardowns are a constant threat and speculative developers, rather than residents, seem to be in control of the neighborhood.

Why Teardowns Are on the Rise

What has caused the recent increase in teardowns? The trend is driven in part by the thriving economy and the substantial wealth that many households have accumulated over the past decade. But teardowns are also occurring because a growing number of people are looking for alternatives to the long, congested commutes and the car-oriented lifestyle of the suburbs. Attractive, convenient, and stable urban and close-in suburban neighborhoods are in great demand, but the availability of large homes in these areas is sometimes limited. As a

result, many homebuyers are purchasing houses that they consider to be outdated or too small, then using them as “scrape-offs.”

Cities are on the rebound, as evidenced by the net population gains over the past decade in 35 of the nation’s 50 largest cities. As more people look for housing in urban and close-in suburban locations, they are often drawn to well-preserved historic neighborhoods. Many of these new residents, however, are bringing suburban-style housing preferences back to the city with them, including the desire for vast square footage, numerous amenities, and multi-car garages. These features are difficult to fit into many historic neighborhoods. The challenge is to accommodate changing housing tastes and needs without sacrificing the character and long-term stability of older neighborhoods.

Teardowns and Smart Growth

Some argue that teardowns are a beneficial component of smart growth because they bring density back to cities, but this is often not the case. Most teardowns do not add density but simply replace existing homes with larger and more costly structures. There is, however, a “win-win” alternative to teardowns. Architecturally compatible new infill construction is a true smart-growth strategy that

directs higher density and new investment to appropriate areas. Vacant land, surplus parking lots, and other development opportunities abound in most American cities—from abandoned airfields in Denver to former freeway corridors in Boston, Milwaukee, and San Francisco to reclaimed “brownfields” in Pittsburgh and Chicago. In addition, almost every city still has older neighborhoods with numerous underused historic structures and vacant land, just waiting for new investment and rehabilitation.

Typically, there are fewer large parcels of open land available in older suburban areas. In these communities, teardowns can be avoided by encouraging sensitive additions to existing buildings and by identifying parcels where compatibly designed, appropriately scaled new homes can be added to complement the established historic character of the neighborhood.

Prevention Strategies

What steps can communities take to prevent teardowns or better manage their impact? First and most important, residents must develop a vision for the future—including where and how to accommodate growth and change—and then put in place mechanisms to ensure that this vision is not compromised by speculative teardown developers who have

no long-term interest in the welfare of the neighborhood.

In places where the pace of teardowns has already reached a crisis point, it may be necessary to provide a “cooling-off” period, through a temporary moratorium on teardowns, to allow time for the community to develop a consensus about what to do. Another useful early step is to prepare visual simulations of what a neighborhood would look like if it were fully “built out” under current zoning. Often the difference between the “build out” scenario and current conditions is dramatic, suggesting the need to develop strategies to manage development more carefully.

The following list illustrates the range of techniques being used by communities to control teardowns and protect the character of historic neighborhoods. In considering these and other approaches, communities should keep in mind that there is no “magic bullet” that will stop teardowns. A variety of strategies will be needed, combining several tools, including many that are described below:

- Placing a **moratorium on demolitions**, with high penalties for violations, can prevent the loss of significant structures and allow time to develop alternatives to demolition.
- Designating **historic districts** enables local boards to review and if necessary prevent proposed demolitions

and ensure that new construction is compatible with the existing historic character of designated districts.

- Establishing **conservation districts** can prevent demolitions and ensure that new construction is in keeping with the established building patterns and scale of designated neighborhoods.
- Providing for **design review** of new construction projects in residential areas, whether for all new homes or for projects above a certain size threshold, allows city planning staff to suggest alternatives to particularly incompatible construction proposals.
- Setting **floor-area-ratios** and **lot coverage requirements** keeps the scale of new construction compatible with existing homes by capping the percentage of a residential lot that may be built upon.
- Revising **development standards** to define criteria

Sensitive infill construction can help knit communities together, such as these new houses located in the Midtown neighborhoods of Memphis. Photo by Adrian Scott Fine.



for building height and width, roof pitch, garage and driveway locations, front and side setbacks, and other building features helps ensure that new houses and additions are consistent with existing community character.

- **Downzoning** can adjust the mix of uses and densities permitted in specific areas to fit more closely with what residents want their neighborhood to be in the future.
- Negotiating **voluntary easements and covenants** for selected individual prop-

erties, either through donation or purchase, can ensure that the architectural character as well as the affordability of specific landmark properties is permanently protected.

- Developing **historic real estate marketing and education programs** is a way to inform realtors and potential new residents about the history of older neighborhoods and provide guidance in areas such as rehabilitating historic homes and building compatible additions.

- Providing **financial incentives and technical assistance**, such as tax abatements, low-interest loans, and referrals to qualified contractors, helps residents acquire and rehabilitate historic houses.

Neighborhood residents have worked for decades to protect and nurture the slow, incremental revitalization of many historic neighborhoods across the country. Now, suddenly, some of these very same places are threatened, not by people leaving the

neighborhood as was the case too often in the past, but this time by newcomers wanting to move in, on their own terms. The challenge today is to manage this new investment so that it respects the character and distinctiveness that made these neighborhoods so valuable and desirable in the first place.

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NEW PUBLICATION HELPS COMMUNITIES TAME THE TEARDOWN TREND

A new National Trust publication, *Protecting America's Historic Neighborhoods: Taming the Teardown Trend*, helps preservationists, planners, community activists, and homeowners address the threat of teardowns in their own neighborhoods. The 20-page booklet, with numerous photographs and graphics, documents the evolution and growing occurrence of teardowns around the country; looks at the economic and social conditions that are fueling this practice; and examines the aesthetic, economic, and social costs to older neighborhoods. The booklet (order number 2108) is available from Preservation Books for \$10 including postage and handling.

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