

Teardowns:

UP WITH THE NEW AND DOWN WITH THE OLD?

by Beth Humstone

Up with the new and down with the old!” reads the ad by a Washington, DC realtor promoting teardowns to give the property owner the “best of both worlds – a new home in an established neighborhood.”¹ But this practice of bulldozing older homes to replace them with updated – and usually substantially larger – ones is alarming to many planners, neighborhood groups, and preservationists. This so-called “mansionization” trend is dramatically changing the scale of traditional neighborhoods, threatening affordable housing, and altering historic properties – most often in modest, post-war housing developments that once offered entry-level housing.

Even with the cool-down in the housing market, communities in different parts of the country are wrestling with this issue. This is especially true for “first ring” suburbs that are attractive for their proximity to jobs (lower commuting costs) and lower prices (small lots and houses in postwar subdivisions) and in scarce waterfront locations. Moreover we can expect that more communities will again face the problem of teardowns once the housing market improves. What better time to plan than now while there’s some breathing space?

Why Tear Down?

Teardowns are not new. In 2002 the National Trust for Historic Preservation cited teardowns as one of the most significant threats facing historic neighborhoods across the country.² In 2008 the Trust documented teardowns in more than 500 communities in 40 states.

Suburbs within easy commute to jobs and close to shops, services, and public transportation are increasingly popular.³ But if local zoning allows for very large structures, the older ranches, split-levels, and capes found in many suburban

In Oak Park, Illinois, “property values were going to continue to increase, but the concern was that tear down construction was going to create a situation in which property values would rise at a rate that would transform Oak Park into an exclusive community.”⁴

1 From the website of Reel Homes: www.reel-homes.com/teardowns.html.

2 The National Trust included teardowns on their listing of the nation’s 11 “Most Endangered Historic Places.” See “Teardowns and McMansions,” www.preservationnation.org/issues/teardowns/

neighborhoods will be ripe for teardowns.

Teardowns vs. Infill

Why are teardowns a problem? After all, infill development is often encouraged as an efficient way for communities to grow because it uses existing utilities and services, helps to prevent sprawl, reduces traffic, and revitalizes depressed neighborhoods. Yet, not every neighborhood is appropriate for new housing that is out-of-scale with the area’s existing housing stock.

Among the primary concerns with teardowns and mansionization are:

- The replacement by higher-priced homes of housing that is more affordable.
- Destruction of the scale and existing character of a neighborhood.
- Loss of historic resources, including “Mid-Century Modern” homes.
- Rise in property taxes throughout the neighborhood.
- Environmental impacts, including tree removal, reduction in green space,

3 See, for example, the National Association of Realtors’ 2011 Community Preference Survey: *What Americans are looking for when deciding where to live.*

4 See Hay/Dobbs, *Contemporary Residential Construction Issues in Regards to Tear Down Development in Edina, Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN, 2006).



A post-war subdivision in Concord, Massachusetts, illustrates the “old” and the “new” in the teardown-mansionization trend.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Taxing Teardowns

Highland Park, Illinois, and some of its neighboring communities, have taken an interesting approach to teardowns: they tax them. According to Highland Park Senior Planner Lee Smith, AICP, the City of Highland Park has collected more than \$1.8 million by imposing a tax of \$10,000 on every teardown.

At the time the tax was enacted in 2003, Highland Park (a suburb north of Chicago, with a population of about 30,000) had been averaging some 60 to 75 teardowns per year.

The aim of the tax is two-fold. Its primary purpose, Smith notes, has been to fund the provision of affordable housing through a local municipal housing trust fund. A secondary, more modest goal has been to reduce the number of teardowns.

To Smith, there's a strong nexus between teardowns and housing affordability. As relatively affordable homes are demolished and replaced by much more expensive ones, the city's overall housing stock becomes less affordable.

Critical to the City Council's enactment of the tax was a 2002 report prepared by the Highland Park Housing Commission documenting the impact of teardowns. The results were striking. Many of the new houses were more than double in assessed value. [See photos, one typical "before and after" pair from the Commission's report].

Two-thirds of the revenues generated by the teardown tax goes into the city's housing trust fund. According to Smith, over the past seven years this has supported creation of 33 units of permanently affordable housing, with 5 more units in the works.

Smith stresses that the tax is not the city's only approach to dealing with teardowns. The city's historic preservation commission also has the power to delay proposed demolitions up to 180 days, allowing time for the property owner and community to seek other options.

While the number of teardowns has been sharply reduced during the current recession, given Highland Park's location close to Chicago and the lakeshore, the challenge of dealing with teardowns will likely return after the housing market strengthens.



McMansions can result in a dramatic change of scale in a neighborhood, as here in Dallas, Texas.

loss of sunlight, and increased stormwater runoff.

- Disposal of demolition debris.

SOLUTIONS:

There are several approaches planners can take to understand and address the issue of teardowns in their communities. To start, planners should understand the market for teardowns, the issues they pose, and which neighborhoods are most vulnerable.

How do you know if a neighborhood is ripe for teardowns? Among the two key indicators:

1. Existing homes are modest but their lots have a relatively high value. As noted earlier, this is often the case in attractive first-ring suburbs close to downtowns. Often these homes were built between the 1940s and 1970s, range in size from 900 to 1,400 square feet, and were designed as starter homes.⁵ They are typically laid out in compact, well-defined neighborhoods.

2. The zoning for the neighborhood allows for larger structures that have bigger footprints than current structures. Height, setbacks, and lot coverage provisions may enable structures to go up and/or out.

Through visual surveys and a review of town property records, planners can document the existing character of a neighborhood – the styles of housing; existing house sizes and heights; typical setback distances; the type and location of garages; lot depth and width; the presence of alleys; landscaping and topogra-

phy; roof pitch; and building materials.

Planners can note existing property values and where teardowns have already occurred. An inventory of the dimensions and characteristics of the new structures should be made as well to pinpoint what type of development controls are needed. Any historic resources – that is, buildings that are designated as local landmarks, that are in a local historic district, or that may be eligible for the state or national register of historic places – should be identified.⁶ Photographs and maps can be used to illustrate the changes taking place.

continued on next page



⁵ See Lane Kendig, *Too Big, Boring, or Ugly: Planning and Design Tools to Combat Monotony, the Too-big House, and Teardowns*, PAS Report No. 528, American Planning Association, Chicago, IL, 2004, p. 58.

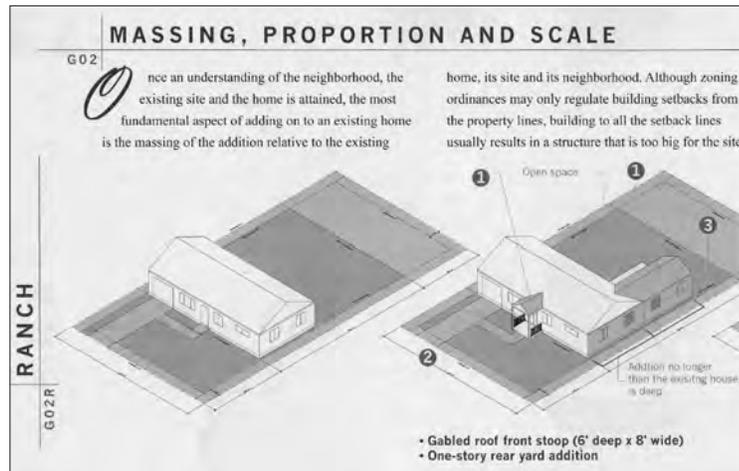
Teardowns

continued from previous page

Public understanding of this issue is important. While many homeowners oppose teardowns and the mansionization of their neighborhood, others see this as a sign of progress. Builders and prospective buyers may want the opportunity to demolish and start over. Planners can inform the public of the significance of these neighborhoods, the concerns with teardowns, and alternatives that can save the existing homes.

If a community wants to take action to address teardowns and mansionization, some regulatory options can be considered:

Moratoria: To allow time for planning and the development of local regulations, particularly where teardowns are a growing concern, some communities have adopted short-term moratoria. Chevy Chase, Maryland, for example, adopted a six-month moratorium in 2006 to give time to develop a vision and regulations



The First Suburbs Coalition in the Kansas City region developed a handbook on how to expand traditional post World War II housing without altering the character of the neighborhood.

to address teardowns.⁷ A moratorium should have a clear purpose that is directly related to the comprehensive plan and the health, safety, and welfare of the community; a time frame; and a process for development of the new regulations.

Demolition Delay: Some communities require a delay in demolition to allow time for public comment and to enable consideration of alternatives. Portland, Oregon requires a 120-day delay prior to removal of locally-designated historic resources. Lake Forest, Illinois requires a two-year delay. At the expiration of the delay period, demolition typically may proceed.

Demolition Review: A community may have regulations that require review of demolitions and that enable denial of a request for tearing down a building or placement of conditions on the removal. Most often, these regulations are applied to buildings or neighborhoods of state or national historic significance.

Considerations for demolition review may include:

- the historic value of the house and neighborhood where the teardown is to occur,

- the proposed use of the new building and its benefit to the community (such as affordable housing),

- the impact of the new building on the character of the neighborhood,
- reasonable economic use of the site,
- potential for mitigation of adverse impacts from new construction, and
- proposed disposal of materials from the demolition.

Dimensional Requirements: Zoning provisions aimed at preventing mansionization typically cover height, setbacks, floor area ratio (FAR), and lot coverage. While protecting the existing character of the neighborhood is important, planners can permit reasonable enlargements to existing buildings.

- **Height:** An issue with new buildings in older neighborhoods is that they often tower over older houses, blocking their sunlight and marginalizing their presence on the street.

One way to address this problem is to limit the height of buildings to the prevailing height along the street or within the block or district. The regulations should specify how the height is to be measured. Because some new construction may raise the front door threshold high above that of the older house, it's important that zoning regulations carefully indicate how height is to be measured. DeKalb County, Georgia limits heights to 28 feet from the "front threshold to the highest roof peak." And the threshold cannot be more than two feet higher than that of the previous house.⁸

Resources:



- Adrian Scott Fine, *Is the Teardown Trend Over?*, Forum, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Summer 2009/Vol.23, No. 4.
- Lane Kendig, *Too Big, Boring, or Ugly: Planning and Design Tools to Combat Monotony, the Too-big House, and Teardowns*, PAS Report No. 528, American Planning Association (2004).
- Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Montgomery County Department of Planning, *Teardown/Mansionization Bulletin: Protecting Older Neighborhoods with Newer Tools* (August 2006).
- Mid-America Regional Council, *First Suburbs Coalition Idea Book*; details at: www.marc.org/firstsuburbs/planbook.htm.
- National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Teardowns and McMansions*; www.preservationnation.org/issues/teardowns.
- U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places* (2002); www.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs/index.htm.

⁶ For more information, see U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*.

⁷ Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, Montgomery County Department of Planning, *Teardown/Mansionization Bulletin: Protecting Older Neighborhoods with Newer Tools*, Montgomery County, Maryland (August 2006).

- **Setbacks:** As with heights, setbacks can reflect the average size of front, side, and rear yards in the neighborhood determined from aerial photography, property tax maps, GIS maps, or on-site measurement. Regulations should specify what uses will be allowed within the setback area (e.g., decks, porches, tool sheds, and/or garages).

- **FAR:** When used in conjunction with height and setback requirements, FAR offers a way to manage the bulk of a building by relating the size of a building to the size of a lot. For example, if the ratio is .5:1, then the maximum allowable total building square footage would be half the square footage of the lot. The regulations will need to define what area is included in measuring the floor area and how basements and attics are to be treated.

- **Building Coverage:** While setbacks provide the limits within which a building can be located, building coverage establishes the maximum size of the building footprint on the lot. A review of the size of the footprints of existing houses can help establish a reasonable number for building coverage.

Historic Districts: Some neighborhoods where the original integrity of the houses is still mostly intact may qualify as historic districts. The National Park Service and National Trust for Historic Preservation (see *Resources sidebar*) offer good guidance on how to determine eligibility for a historic district. Once eligibility is documented, regulations protecting the unique historic characteristics of houses within the district can be established.

Neighborhood Conservation Districts: These districts, often implemented as zoning overlays in existing residential districts, provide additional regulations, such as height, setback, FAR, and lot coverage requirements. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for example, enables Neighborhood Conservation Districts where 51 percent of residents

8 Case study on Oak Park in Hay/Dobbs, *Contemporary Residential Construction Issues*, p. 17 [cited in footnote 4].

9 For more on this: www.ci.chapel-hill.nc.us/index.aspx?page=570.



Putting the Spotlight on Teardowns

Here's a photo prominently featured on WestportNow.com – Westport, Connecticut's online newspaper – this past June 2nd. It's one of more than 500 local teardowns the newspaper has highlighted since starting its "Teardown of the Day" feature six years ago.

According to Associate Editor Dave



DAVE MATLOW / WESTPORTNOW.COM

have nominated and approved them. Six districts have been implemented and two are under review.⁹

Garages: Many post-WW II homes have single car garages or carports – too small for many of today's homeowners. If new or enlarged garages are allowed, zoning regulations should aim to limit their size and location to prevent them from overwhelming the existing house and to preserve the character and scale of the neighborhood. One way to do this is by requiring the front of the garage to be set back eight feet or so from the plane of the front wall of the house.

Site Preservation: Many older neighborhoods are defined by the mature vegetation on their lots and along their streets. Zoning provisions that prohibit the removal of mature trees and require maintenance of vegetative cover can help preserve these qualities.

SUMMING UP:

In some places tearing down buildings may be inevitable. Some buildings

Matlow, these postings have had an impact, with builders becoming more "hesitant about getting involved with potentially high profile teardowns." Matlow also notes that community response has, at least in some cases, led to replacement housing more closely "replicating the town's or neighborhood's streetscape."

The rate of demolitions in suburban Westport (population just under 30,000) had slowed down in 2009, says Matlow, but "is now on par with pre-recession totals."

decay to irreparable states. Some areas become developed as higher density residential neighborhoods. But where lot sizes don't change and a viable supply of modest and affordable homes exists in a cohesive neighborhood, managing teardowns is a good option for planners and will help ward off the problems of mansionization in many cities. ♦

Beth Humstone is a contributing writer for the PCJ. Over the past 35 years, she has worked as a planning consultant on a wide range of projects in rural communities and small towns. Humstone is a past member of the Burlington, Vermont, Planning Commission. She is the author, with Julie Campoli and Alex MacLean, of Above and Beyond, Visualizing Change in Small Towns and Rural Areas (APA Planners Press, 2002).



For a list of Beth Humstone's previous articles in the *Planning Commissioners Journal*, go to: www.plannersweb.com/humstone.html.