

Teardowns

THE TEARDOWN TREND

In the late 1980s, in established urban communities and inner-ring suburbs, a pattern emerged of replacing older, often historic houses with newer, larger ones. The impact of this trend is so widespread that in 2002 the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed neighborhoods where "teardowns" occur as being among "America's Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places." A variety of names are used to describe the trend, including "scrape-offs," "knockdowns," and "scrapers." The replacement houses have even more colorful names: "bigfoots," "starter castles," "monster homes," "megamansions," and "McMansions."

Behind the Trend. Homebuyers typically pursue the teardown option when drawn to an area because of proximity to employment, school quality, or aesthetic appeal (e.g., streets with mature trees), but prefer a home size larger than the area offers. While neighbors and preservationists may welcome an influx of new residents, their new houses are not greeted with the same enthusiasm when the height, width, lot coverage, and even building materials differ drastically from existing homes in the neighborhood.

Developers pursue the teardown option primarily in areas where undeveloped land is scarce and the real estate market is strong. In such areas, the value of the land exceeds the value of the house. Teardowns are likely if a developer can expect to sell a replacement home for about three times the initial cost of the target property.

IMPACTS

Teardowns affect the physical, economic, and social stability of a community. They simultaneously disrupt the physical continuity of neighborhoods, alter the economics of the housing market, and segregate the social community.

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Physical Impacts. Teardowns most visibly affect the character of the street. New houses are often massive and out of scale with adjacent houses. In many cases, trees and vegetation are removed during construction to accommodate the larger building footprint. Heights are maximized and backyards minimized, blocking sunlight to neighboring properties. The automobile takes precedence over the pedestrian. Driveways and garages (sometimes larger than typical two-car garages) dominate the front facade. The houses shift orientation away from the street inward around private spaces. In neighborhoods with strong historic character, each demolition erodes the qualities that make the neighborhood unique.

Economic Impacts. Teardowns threaten the economic stability of neighborhoods, although some teardown proponents cite increases in property values in areas where teardowns are common. Critics say these areas already have strong real estate markets, and after reaching a certain point, the property value of existing houses decreases. The initial increase in property value ignites a selling frenzy that floods the market.

Social Impacts. Teardowns threaten the social structure of a neighborhood by removing the housing stock typical of traditional neighborhoods, including ranch homes, small backyard houses, and those with carriage-house apartments. These starter homes have long served as affordable housing for young families. Single-parent households, moderate-income families, and retired homeowners simply cannot afford the new houses. Homeowners on fixed incomes or with low-paying jobs may be especially hurt by rapid property tax increases. They may be forced to sell, leaving the neighborhood less diverse.

(Continued on back.)



Teardowns cater to the automobile.

Adrian Scott Fine

PRESERVATION OF CHARACTER

Teardowns are not inherently problematic, but become so when no consideration is paid to outcome. To establish a teardown policy, a community first must clearly define its current, predicted (under current zoning), and ideal character. Finally, planners need to compare these visions, reconciling them where they differ.

Current Character. Character studies identify the defining features of a community. The studies include photographs taken by citizens of important subjects and cognitive maps of important places, including corridors and districts, allowing citizens to see beyond architectural character.

Predicted Character. Planners should evaluate the effects of existing development regulations on teardowns (e.g., what do existing zoning provisions allow for setback, side yard setback, garage orientation, and lot coverage?) Most communities under a teardown threat revise their zoning regulations—many adding design guidelines for new construction—to ensure that new houses are compatible with the community's character.

To foster community support for code revisions, citizens need to understand how current zoning codes affect development. One way to do this is through visioning workshops, where architects and planners use visual simulations to show how the neighborhood would look if fully developed under current zoning policy.

Ideal Character. Discussing the impact of teardowns should be part of a larger comprehensive planning process. Visual preference surveys and charrettes help communities define an ideal character. But citizens also should be made aware of the trade-offs associated with their preferred vision. Once a unified vision is established, the community can put out a set of non-binding guidelines and educational materials for homeowners and developers to encourage desired outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Planning tools to help mitigate the impacts of teardowns fall into two categories: economic incentives and context-sensitive design guidelines.

Many attribute the teardown phenomenon to economic factors that make demolition financially attractive. Regulations that limit house size through floor-to-area ratios, lot coverage requirements, setback, height and open space standards, and bulk limits prevent builders from maximizing the buildable area. The regulations ensure a smaller home size, making teardowns less profitable.

Another option is to make preservation more financially attractive. For example, incentives and zoning bonuses can include financial and technical assistance and increased square footage allowances for those who make context-sensitive additions or changes to existing property.

Context-sensitive regulations attempt to control the physical effects of teardowns. Historic and conservation overlay districts use specific development regulations to accomplish or to preserve desired characteristics such as uniform building setback or a cohesive architectural style. In these districts, a design review process helps to determine home demolition or construction approval. While effective at neighborhood preservation, design review requires a knowledgeable planning staff and administrative resources.

Nonregulatory approaches include easements, covenants, and community land trusts, which are voluntary agreements with property owners who agree to forego certain property rights or purchase properties knowing their rights are restricted. The restrictions typically govern development standards and limit sales price.

Communities must consider the consequences of each strategy. For example, a fragmented application of design districts may leave crucial areas unprotected, undermining the effects of the protected areas. Bulk limits may restrict garage or basement apartments, limiting affordable housing options. Furthermore, financial incentives cannot necessarily stop teardowns or even guarantee compatible design. Design regulation may not be politically feasible if property owners or developers feel regulation imposes on their rights without adequate compensation. Therefore, combined approaches that both guide good design and provide financial incentives are the most effective and politically feasible option. *Franz Heitzer with Luis Nuñez.* ■

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Replacement homes can alter the character and density of neighborhoods.



photos by Michael Davidson



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