Scrape-Offs and McMansions: Are Monster Houses Sustainable?

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AGENDA

- Background
  - What is a “teardown”?
  - Where is it happening?
  - What’s causing teardowns?
  - Who cares?
- What happens
- Framing the Issue
- Addressing the Issue
- Legal Issues
- Market Concerns
- Major Objectives
What is a “teardown”? 

- Definition: Destroying an existing structure to build another
- Occurs in an existing neighborhood, where the too-big house is out of scale with its neighbors
- Other issues

Where is it happening?

- Inner-ring suburbs and central cities
  - Dallas, TX (Preston Hollow), Clayton, MO
- Where housing stock is sound, but dated
  - Austin, TX
  - Boulder, CO
Where is it happening?

- Neighborhoods with desirable character
  - Denver, CO (Washington Park and Cherry Creek)
  - Falls Church, VA
- Pre-platted subdivisions in desirable locations
  - Sanibel, FL
  - Ft Lauderdale, FL

What’s causing teardowns?

- Vacant land is not available where people want it due to factors of:
  - Community amenities
  - Commuting cost & time
  - Prior development
What’s causing teardowns?

- Value of lot exceeds value of improvement
  - Likely to be 50 percent or more of value of entire property

What’s causing teardowns?

- People want more in their homes
  - Walk-in pantry / commercial fixtures
  - full bathrooms / walk-in closets
  - 3+ car garage
  - 10’ ceiling heights
  - home offices / media rooms
What’s causing teardowns?

- Average house size
  - 1987: 1,900 sq. feet
  - 2001: 2,300 sq. feet
  - 2005: 2,434 sq. feet

  In N.E, average house size was 2,556 in 2005

What’s causing teardowns?

- The financial systems are in place to encourage larger homes
  - Accumulated wealth
  - Low interest rates
  - Mortgage interest deduction
Who’s cares?

- Those who are happy
  - People buying in
  - People selling out
  - Short-term investors
  - Builders
  - Realtors
  - Tax assessors
Who cares?

- Those who are unhappy
  - Long-term residents
  - People not buying or selling
  - Residents who rue loss of character / scale
  - Neighbors to “bulk-ups”
  - Aestheticians/historic preservationists

What happens?

- Controversy
- Eventually, it becomes a political issue
  - Is it progress?
  - Is it an opportunity?
  - Is it detracting?
  - Is it a threat?
Framing the issue

- “What constitutes an appropriate house in terms of building and lot size, context within the neighborhood, or other objective measurements?”

Framing the issue

- The Master Plan
- The Reexamination Report
Addressing the Issue

- Development/Infill standards
- Conservation districts
- Design manuals
- Historic preservation
- New zoning code; form-based code

Development/Infill standards

- Building orientation
- Contextual setbacks
- Building height
- Building or lot coverage ratio
- Floor area ratio
- Roof form
- Garage location
- Façade articulation
- Driveways
- Landscaping
- Floor area ratio
- Building volume ratio

Advantages
- Precise
- Impartial
- Administrative
- Can be non-confrontational

Disadvantages
- One size doesn’t fit all
- Requires expertise
- Staff capacity
- Little impact if standard inappropriate
- Tend to adopt and forget
Building orientation

- Maintain consistent façade and building orientation along block face

- Advantages
  - Maintains building orientation along street and “character” of street
  - Usually ensures buildings front street

- Disadvantages
  - Alone does not address height, mass, and setback

Contextual setbacks

- Maintain setbacks that are consistent with other buildings on block face

- Advantages
  - Maintains building setback along street and “character” of street
  - Ensures consistent setback between buildings

- Disadvantages
  - Alone does not address height, mass, or orientation
  - How to deal with overhangs
Building height

- Maintain established building height (contextual height)
- Advantages
  - Maintains building height in neighborhood
- Disadvantages
  - Does not address mass, setback, or orientation

Building height

- From
  - Lowest grade
  - Average grade
- From
  - Existing grade
  - Finished grade
Building height

- To –
  - top of ridge
  - midpoint of roof

Keep your stories straight
- basements / cellars
- attics
  - hip / gable
  - gambrel
  - salt box
Setbacks—Daylight plane restrictions

- A three-dimensional plane that describes the building envelope that the residence must fit within
- Reduces building mass and projections
- May vary by zoning district
Example of Setback Planes

Source: City of Austin, TX

Building or lot coverage ratio

- Percentage or ratio of the building coverage
- Advantage
  - Can address, in some form, maximum impervious surface
- Disadvantage
  - Fails to deal with the vertical dimension
Floor area ratio

- Ratio of total building floor area to area of the site

Advantage
- Takes multiple floors into account
- Uses floors as a surrogate for height

Disadvantage
- Can never be completely accurate because of variations in height of floors
Roof Form

- Roof pitch: maintain a minimum roof pitch (e.g., between 3:12 and 12:12)
- Contextual roof form

Advantages
- Maintains consistency of physical design
- Assists in controlling mass of building

Disadvantages
- Does not address height, setback, or orientation

Garage location

- Require setback not deviate by more than 25 percent of setbacks on block face
- Establish minimum setback standards

Advantages
- Maintains consistency of physical design
- Prevents garage dominance
Façade articulation

- Require dwelling facades visible from street to include articulation every 16 feet
- No single wall extends more than 16 feet without a projection or recess
- Advantages
  - Breaks up mass
  - Softens physical appearance of larger homes

Step-backs

- Require use of height step-backs when building reaches certain height
- Encourage use of height step-backs by allowing to encroach a minimal amount into side or front yards
- Advantages
  - Softens physical appearance of larger homes
Driveways

- Driveways maintain maximum width of 12 feet or less between driveway apron and front face of home
- Advantages
  - Softens physical appearance of larger homes
- Disadvantages
  - Does not address height, mass, or setbacks

Landscaping

- Require additional site landscaping around home
- Advantages
  - Softens physical appearance of larger homes
Building volume ratio

- BVR: volume indicator that requires measuring the entire volume of the building above finished grade, or the visible portion of the building

\[
BVR = \frac{BV}{10/LA}
\]

Where BV is building volume, LA is lot area, and “10” is average height of floor
Building volume ratio

- Advantages
  - Accounts for basements, attics, cathedral ceilings, and higher floor-to-ceiling heights
  - Flexible

- Disadvantage
  - May require computer-aided design software to calculate

Conservation districts

- Advantages
  - Flexible
  - Can account for physical elements relevant to character issues
  - Development review administrative

- Disadvantages
  - Can be time-consuming to establish
  - Usually requires additional staff capacity to administer
Design manuals

- Design manuals
- Pattern

Advantages
- Non-confrontational
- Non-intrusive
- Can be unifying in vision

Disadvantages
- Voluntary, relies on good will
- May have little impact

Historic preservation designation of area in zoning ordinance

- Authority depends on Municipal Land Use Law
- Generally requires a historic preservation element

Identification of criteria up front
- Requires individual approvals
- Can be confrontational
Form-based Codes

- Address the relationship between
  - Building faces and the public realm
  - Form and mass of buildings in relationship to one another
  - The scale and types of streets and blocks

Form-based Codes

- Keyed to a regulating plan that designates the appropriate form and scale
- Lesser focus on land use
- Comprehensive
- Favored by new urbanists
- Lots of measurements involved
- Significant commitment of resources to prepare
Form-based Codes

- Requires
  - Existing conditions analysis
  - Charrette
  - Regulating plan
  - Urban standards
  - Architectural standards (as necessary)

Legal issues

- Constitutional
  - Taking
  - Procedural due process
  - Substantive due process
  - Equal protection
Legal issues

- Administrative
  - Creation of nonconformities
  - Adjudicatory relief
  - Variances

Market Concerns: Changes?

- NAHB surveys already indicating that more people want a smaller house with more high quality products and amenities
- Do you think American homes have gotten too big?

- Yes 69%
- No 31%

CNN/Money Poll (8/05)
27,330 responses
Market Concerns: A Fad?

- If a fad, big houses will go the way of the “pet rock”

Summary: The Big Objectives

- Balance concerns about neighborhood impact and privacy with property rights
- Create regulations that, when applied, do not preclude modest renovations, additions by homeowners
- Ensure that when new guidelines are implemented, older homes do not become nonconforming
Sources


The End