

Scrape-Offs and McMansions: *Are Monster Houses Sustainable?*

Rocky Mountain Land-Use Institute
17th Annual Land Use Conference
March 7th, 2008



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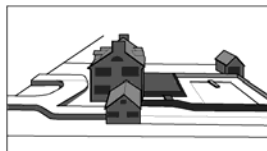
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AGENDA

- 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



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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



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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



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What's causing teardowns?

- Vacant land is not available where people want it due to factors of:
 - Community amenities
 - Commuting cost & time
 - Prior development



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What's causing teardowns?

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



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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



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What's causing teardowns?



- Average house size

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

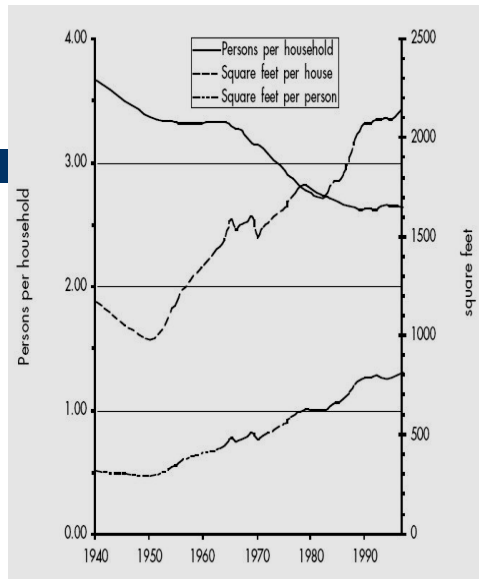
In N.E., average house size was 2,556 in 2005

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



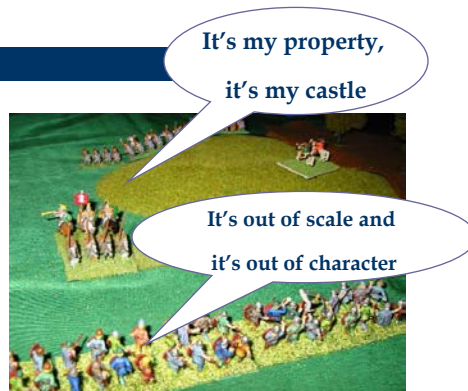
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What happens?

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



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Framing the issue

- “What constitutes an appropriate house in terms of building and lot size, context within the neighborhood, or other objective measurements?”
 - Terry Szold, “Mansionization and its Discontents,” Journal of the American Planning Association (2005)

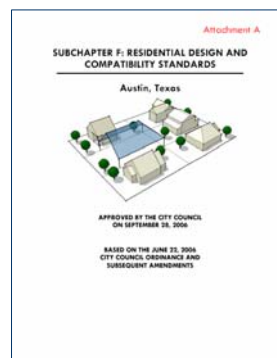
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Framing the issue

- The Master Plan
- The Reexamination Report



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Addressing the Issue

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



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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

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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



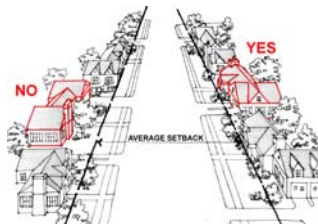
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Contextual setbacks

- 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



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Building height

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



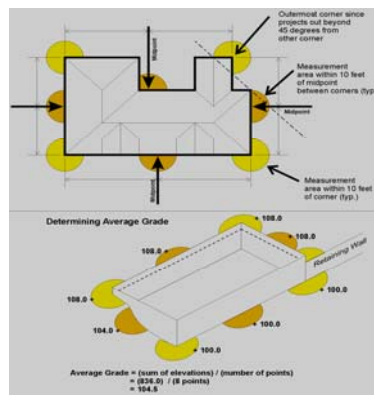
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Building height

- From
 - Lowest grade
 - Average grade
- From
 - Existing grade
 - Finished grade



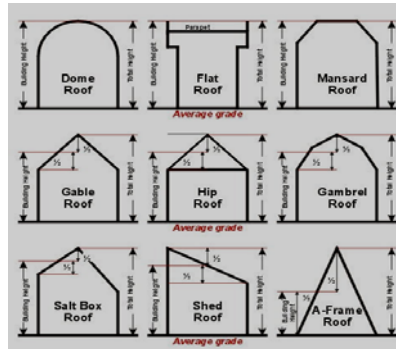
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Building height

- To –
 - top of ridge
 - midpoint of roof



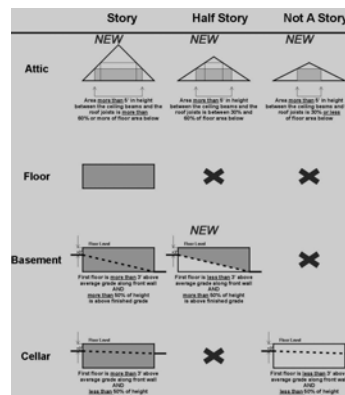
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Building height

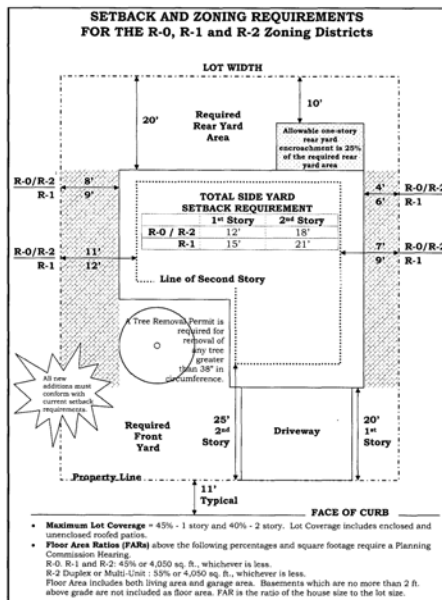
- Keep your stories straight
 - basements / cellars
 - attics
 - hip / gable
 - gambrel
 - salt box



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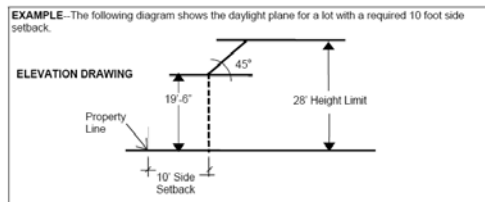
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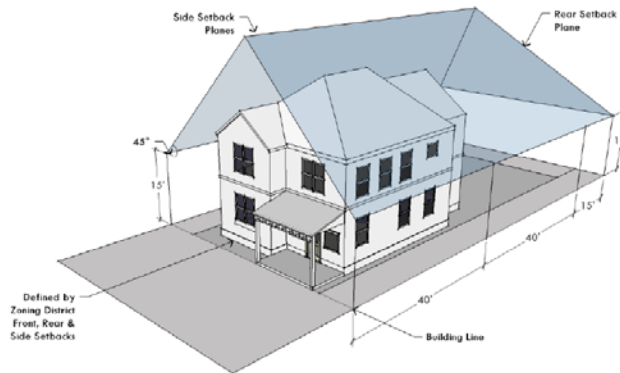


Setbacks—Daylight plane restrictions

- 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

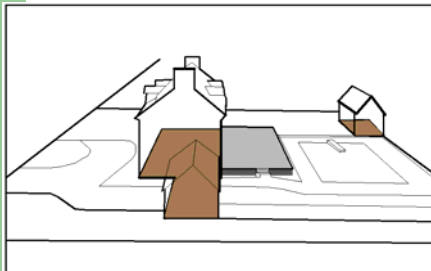
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Building or lot coverage ratio

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



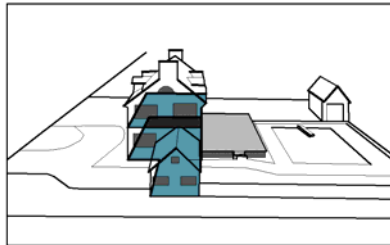
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Floor area ratio

- 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

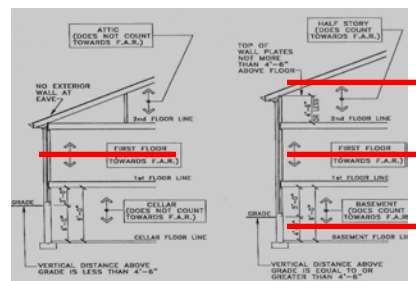
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Floor area ratio

- Definition
 - exclusions (attic?)
 - bonuses (garage?)



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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



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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



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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



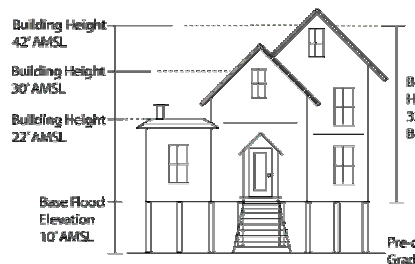
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Step-backs

- 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



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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



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Landscaping

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



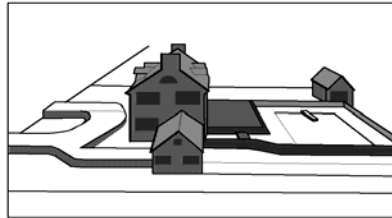
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Building volume ratio

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



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Building volume ratio

- $BVR = BV/10/LA$

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

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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

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Historic preservation designation of area in zoning ordinance

- Authority depends on Municipal Land Use Law
- Identification of criteria up front
- Requires individual approvals
- Generally requires a historic preservation element
- Can be confrontational

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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

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



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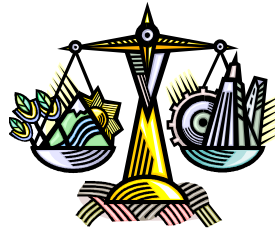
- **Constitutional**
 - **Taking**
 - **Procedural due process**
 - **Substantive due process**
 - **Equal protection**



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Legal issues

- Administrative
 - Creation of nonconformities
 - Adjudicatory relief
 - Variances



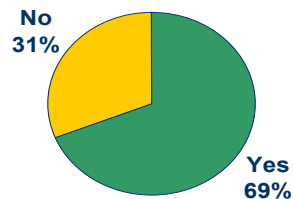
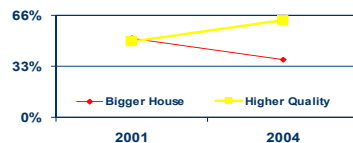
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Market Concerns: Changes?

- 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?



CNN / Money Poll (8/05)
27,330 responses

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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

- Glen Chalder, AICP, "Size Matters," PowerPoint Presentation, New England APA Conference (November 10, 2005) (materials used by permission).
- Lane Kendig, *Too Big, Boring, or Ugly: Planning and Design Tools to Combat Monotony, the Too-big House, and Teardowns*, Planning Advisory Service Report 523 (American Planning Association 2004).
- Terry S. Szold, "Mansionization and Its Discontents: Planners and the Challenge of Regulation Monster Homes," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71(2) (Spring 2005): 182-202.
- Jack L. Nasar, Jennifer S. Evans-Cowley, and Vicente Mantero, "McMansions: The extent and regulation of super-sized houses," *Journal of Urban Design* 12(3) (2007): 339-358.

The End



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