

The Teardown Wars



Len Kaufman for The New York Times

Old houses are often replaced by much bigger ones, as on this street in Delray Beach, Fla.

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BUILDING a dream vacation home — or at least rebuilding one — is becoming harder. In a sweeping backlash against the recent trend of wealthy buyers tearing down small — or even large — houses and replacing them with outsize second homes, communities across the nation are enacting stricter guidelines for home renovations and demolitions.

The result: municipal building codes and historic district ordinances, once relatively easy to understand, have morphed into complex documents that place limitations on many more aspects of a home.

Coronado, Calif., overhauled its building codes for single-family houses last summer, placing stricter limits on design as well as the size of a house relative to its lot. If someone tries to tear down a house in the historic district of Beach Haven, N.J., a preservation commission can impose a six-month moratorium and look for a buyer willing to restore the property.

In the oceanfront neighborhoods of North Beach and Seagate in Delray Beach, Fla., homeowners who want to add a second story are now required to build it with at least a five-foot side setback. A-frame homes, two-story porte-cocheres and shingles in primary colors are no longer allowed.

In 2002, the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) identified 100 communities in 20 states where sections of older neighborhoods were being demolished. As of last month, it had documented more than 300 communities in 33 states where teardowns were having a significant impact. They included Laguna Beach, Calif.; [Nantucket](#), Mass.; and Ocean City, N.J.

But longtime residents opposed to these teardowns are fighting back, the trust said. Nearly 100 communities are "really working hard at lobbying elected officials and planners to put in place measures to address the issue," said Adrian Scott Fine, director of the trust's Northeast field office. "Residents want changes made."

So many people have asked for advice on fighting demolitions of older homes and restricting new oversized homes, Mr. Fine said, that he has written an online guide on methods that communities are using to manage teardowns, like zoning code revisions or public education forums.

Throughout the summer, he said, the guide will be expanded to offer more resources about how residents can stop teardowns and help retain the character of their neighborhoods.

The new regulations in Delray Beach were adopted last year to place limitations on the style of beach homes that can be built in the North Beach and Seagate neighborhoods, which contain nearly 500 homes. In April, the city imposed a six-month halt to construction in five historic districts to postpone the demolition of some houses there. It has hired a consultant to help develop clearer building guidelines.

Those who favor teardowns say they have become necessary as lifestyles have changed. Baby boomers approaching retirement, for example, are one group behind the teardown phenomenon. Such buyers, rather than seeking a simple seasonal property, are increasingly looking for a second home that can ultimately be used year round, with multiple bedrooms for visits by children and grandchildren. An old-fashioned beach bungalow lacking insulation and air-conditioning may look quaint but probably isn't going to cut it.

Jeff Perlman, Delray Beach's mayor, acknowledged that the issue is complex.

"It's a tough balancing act for us," Mr. Perlman said. "You want to preserve these neighborhoods, but you also have to protect property rights and modern living. Some of these homes have no closet space, no garage. There's one or two bedrooms. If these houses are not keeping up to what today's families need, they'll fall into disrepair and be lost."

Last year, Bill Leibert, a real estate agent in Rehoboth, Del., wanted to expand his second home in the downtown district of nearby Lewes, Del. After working with an architect to draw up plans, he applied to the Historic Preservation Commission for approval — a process the city put in place in 2004.

Though the plans for the construction were approved, a request to tear down an old shed on the property to make room for the addition was denied. The shed, built in the 1800's as a stable or chicken coop and later used as a garage, was determined to be a "contributing structure" to the community that lent some value to the streetscape.

Mr. Leibert was told he could either move the shed to a new site, which he said was very costly, or go to a public hearing. "I opted for the public hearing, assuming no one would have a problem with having this shed demolished," Mr. Leibert said. "I was wrong."

At the hearing, neighbors spoke out against the demolition. And so the shed, which has no concrete foundation and is leaning to one side, still sits in the way of his construction plan

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Preservationists say the newly stringent building codes are helping communities maintain their character and add value to properties over time. But real estate professionals say the stricter regulations are turning off potential buyers and forcing some sellers to lower their asking prices.

In neighborhoods where stricter regulations were recently implemented, older properties with heavy building restrictions tend to sell for less, according to many real estate agents. In Lewes, Del., where some homeowners must seek Historic Preservation Commission approval for exterior changes, "the general consensus among Realtors is it has hurt resales due to the constraints put on new buyers," said Tim Foley, an agent with ReMax Realty in Lewes.

"Some buyers," Mr. Foley said, "have decided not to buy in the historic district because of this."

The teardown or knockdown — also known derisively as bash-and-build — crept into the real estate vocabulary about a decade ago along with McMansions, or extra-large homes, often on plots once occupied by more modest structures.

The unprecedented real estate boom of the last few years accelerated the trend nationwide as developers, wanting to get the most for their square footage, swooped into older neighborhoods, replaced dilapidated properties and sold the new larger houses at a profit. Teardowns are increasingly a routine part of the real estate business — particularly in popular second-home communities where vacant land has become scarce and redevelopment value is often greater than the worth of the existing old home.

At least one company, Xchange Properties, based in Clarendon Hills, Ill., deals exclusively in the brokering of teardowns. Its Web site is www.teardowns.com.

Some developers are coming up with creative ways to maximize square footage under the new restrictions. Flagship Properties, a custom-home developer and broker in Coronado has been taking advantage of design elements in Coronado's new building code. To encourage residents to maintain the character of the community as well as its diverse architectural styles, the regulations offer more square footage if certain features are included, like a raised front porch or a large palm tree in the front yard.

By making sure that the color, style and texture of the roof was different from its neighbors' and maintaining the original style of the home's windows and columns, Flagship Properties was able to create about 3 percent more square footage for a house it is updating.

Even in communities where local governments are pushing owners and buyers to preserve homes, the pressure to demolish can be strong. When Sondra and Stephen Beninati bought a run-down inn and restaurant in Beach Haven, N.J., last year as a business venture and vacation home, all three contractors they hired to assess the structure — a faded three-story Folk Victorian — gave them the same advice: "Tear it down."

"They were like, 'Forget it, you're throwing your money away,' " said Ms. Beninati, a 55-year-old Manhattanite whose dream was to run an inn. "Build yourself a brand-new restaurant and make it look old."

But Ms. Beninati was determined to restore the \$1.25 million building to its former grandeur. So the couple found a local architect to refurbish the place, spent months working with the town's Historic Preservation Advisory Commission on everything from a new garden dining area to dormer windows, and spent more than \$750,000 on the renovation, replacing everything from the structural beams to the roof.

Though the reconstruction could be costing more than tearing down and building new, Ms. Beninati said she believed it would pay off in the long run. "I'm hoping this is going to be around for another 100 years," she said. "I believe it makes a town all that more valuable if it has history and not that McMansion look to it."

Watch Your Snout

As older houses are razed to make way for larger, more modern structures, a new vocabulary is emerging. Here is a glossary of terms provided by the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#), which is tracking the teardown trend and working to combat demolitions in older neighborhoods:

CANYON EFFECT What happens when straight, usually blank multistory walls go up next to a smaller existing house, creating a tall, narrow alleyway.

MANSIONIZATION The process of oversize houses replacing smaller ones in an older neighborhood.

LOOM FACTOR A function of building size, location, height, lot coverage and design, derived from houses that loom over a street or their neighbors or that change the existing patterns or character of a neighborhood.

POP-TOP A house enlarged through the use of an addition that breaks through, or pops out of, the original roofline.

SNOUT HOUSE A house whose garage protrudes past the architectural face of the home and is the prominent feature.

DEMOLITION BY NEGLECT Systematically allowing a building or structure to deteriorate to the point that demolition may be necessary to protect public health and safety.