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EDITORIAL

Holding Back the Wrecking Ball

The downturn in the real estate market has slowed but by no means halted the number of teardowns. Teardowns is the practice of buying an older home to demolish it and replace it with a house that dwarfs structures nearby and covers most of its own lot. Just this month in Greenwich, Conn., a granite 1886 Richardsonian Romanesque home was razed with nary a peep of protest. In the last three years, Greenwich has lost scores of homes built in the 1800s. The issue is not merely taste. Some “starter castles” irrevocably change the character of established neighborhoods. And while few mourn the passing of a 1965 split-level ranch, razing real architectural gems should not be taken lightly.

In 2002, the National Trust for Historic Preservation identified 100 communities in 20 states where teardowns were taking place in architecturally significant neighborhoods. By 2008 the list had grown to around 500 communities in 40 states — with about a third of those in New Jersey, New York and Connecticut. In Dallas, during the last 10 years, as many as 1,000 homes have been torn down in the early-20th-century sections of Highland Park and University Park, and teardowns have proliferated in a dozen historic neighborhoods in Denver.

Communities are properly wary of denying owners the right to build, but circumstances can demand action. Hinsdale, Ill., which has lost one third of its houses to teardowns since the 1980s, restricted the practice when the spread of pavement and patios prevented water from sinking into the soil and increased flooding problems.

The most thoughtful approach increases public awareness and participation. In Westport, Conn., a popular [Web site features Teardown of the Day](#), which publicizes planned demolitions as well as before-and-after pictures. Other towns have imposed mandatory demolition delays for houses older than 60 years to give time for the public to react and offer alternatives. That, at least, gives preservationists a fighting chance.

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