

Teardown Trend Altering Historic Neighborhoods

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STEVE INSKEEP, host: The housing market may be cooling, but the pace of teardowns continues to grow. Teardown is where you teardown a smaller, older house and replace it on the same property with a much larger home; or a McMansion. The National Trust for Historic Preservation considers the teardown trend a significant problem in more than 300 communities across the country.

One of the most endangered places, according to the trust, is the Chicago suburb of Kenilworth, as NPR's Cheryl Corley reports.

CHERYL CORLEY: The National Trust for Historic Preservation began keeping track of teardowns a few years ago, adding them to its annual list of endangered historic places in 2002. Trust President Richard Moe says, since then, the pace of demolitions of older and historic homes has spread like a cancer.

Mr. RICHARD MOE (President, National Trust for Historic Preservation): It's estimated that there's some 75,000 homes – older homes - torn down each year now, and the number is growing. And it's happening all over this country. It's certainly happening in the Chicago area - that's one of the hardest hit - but also in New Jersey, Massachusetts, California, and virtually everywhere I go.

CORLEY: When the Trust announced its annual of 11 most endangered and historic places, earlier this year, it included Kenilworth, Illinois, an affluent suburb about 15 miles north of Chicago. There are many large homes - Victorian, Georgians, and others - many of them designed by prominent architects during the turn of the 20th century.

This is where Beth Baxter grew up. She moved back with her family 10 years ago to the west side of town, where the houses are more modest and the lots smaller.

Ms. BETH BAXTER (Resident): Our house is 1800 square feet. This is my neighbor, Evelyn. She is 85 years old and her house is 880 square feet. Baxter's house used to be the biggest on the block, not anymore. Two new homes were built next door, after an older house was torn down.

Ms. BAXTER: These houses are 4,400 square feet. So you've got 4400, 1800, and 880 square feet. So from the front, it provides kind of an interesting visual. So let's walk along.

CORLEY: In Baxter's backyard, there's a wide porch, some patio furniture, lots of plants, and a small trampoline where her children play. The view to the right is unobstructed, the green lawns of other homes visible. To the left, on her neighbor's property, there used to be a huge oak tree.

Ms. BAXTER: That actually spread its leaves all the way over my yard, and that's what I used to look on. And now I look on this solid brick wall. And more than that, you can see that – that's their backdoor that they use, which is totally visible from my back porch. As you can count, one, two, three – there's windows on the other side. There are four or five windows that now overlook my backyard when there were none before. So, what I lost when they built this, was beauty, first of all; serenity of my own yard; privacy.

CORLEY: There are 830 homes in Kenilworth, and during the last four years, more than 30 demolition permits have been issued. There's been vigorous and often divisive debate. The town has made some zoning changes, restricting building heights, for instance. A building commission can delay demolition permits if a house is found to be architecturally or historically significant. Richard Moe says those are the types of steps the National Trust advises towns to take.

Mr. MOE: We don't maintain that every old house should be preserved. In some cases, it's very appropriate to tear down an older house that has deteriorated or that's no longer suitable for one reason or another. But in many cases, homes can be added on to. That's perfectly appropriate. That happens in a lot of places. And if a house must be torn down, the character of the streetscape on which it sits should be respected.

Mr. BRIAN HICKEY (President, Xchange Properties): We do not have to go far.

CORLEY: This is Brian Hickey, the president of Xchange Properties, a real estate firm that deals exclusively in teardowns.

Mr. HICKEY: As you can see: new house, newer, new...

CORLEY: During a driving tour, Hickey points to the new brick homes that have been built in suburban Clarendon Hills. That area, along with neighboring Hinsdale, is considered the epicenter of the teardown trend.

Mr. HICKEY: I'm going to pull over here for a second. You know, nothing is wrong with that house.

CORLEY: That's a ranch.

Mr. HICKEY: Right? There's nothing wrong with that house, but look at the size of the lot; it's a big beautiful lot.

CORLEY: Hickey started his company and Web site teardowns.com five years ago. He says infill redevelopment has not slowed, even though the housing market is not as brisk. He says people are simply replacing older homes that are obsolete, too small, and without the amenities of the modern home.

Mr. HICKEY: We wouldn't see any teardowns if the sale was more valuable as a traditional home. Where there's teardowns, there's not a premium to the house. The appreciation has been in the land, and

really, the depreciation has been in the house, creating this value-in-soil-scenario.

CORLEY: And that's not all bad news, according to Robert Lang. He's the head of the Metropolitan Institute of Virginia Tech. Lang says, for many suburbs, the teardown phenomenon is actually a benefit.

Mr. ROBERT LANG (Director, Metropolitan Institute of Virginia Tech.): A lot of suburbs have nothing other than residential real estate in which to draw taxes from, locally. So putting a bigger house on an existing lot, and then having the taxes reflect that, is a stimulant to the municipal budget. And it also shows that these places are being invested in.

CORLEY: It's suburban gentrification, which Lang says prevents sprawl. And for those who think zoning changes are the answer, Lang says that type of public policy may soon become too costly.

Mr. LANG: Because there's legislation all around the country that argues that if you down zone a lot, it's a taking. It means you've got to pay compensation to the person whose property has been devalued.

CORLEY: A handful of Western States has initiatives on their November ballots and Lang says it's legislation that could spread. He says some areas are taking a different route, creating private covenants and homeowner associations to determine the shape and look of neighborhoods. In Kenilworth, officials say they're still working to find a creative solution that balances the interest of property owners and preservationists in the teardown debate.

Cheryl Corley, NPR News, Chicago.

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