



Should a huge new house supplant a more modestly sized old one?

“Woodman, spare that tree!” cried the young 19th century poet. Today, America’s old-house lovers are crying out in defense of perfectly good houses that are razed to make way for new houses.

Why are the old houses bulldozed? They have the misfortune of being located on expensive land. In posh suburbs, desirable urban areas or at the water’s edge, real estate values have risen so steeply that any house not built to mansion status is almost sure to be worth less than the lot. Wealthy homebuyers or developers see the house as the dispensable element, easily replaced by something bigger, grander, more suited to today’s preferences. In the process, lots of well-built pieces of history are demolished. This trend is ongoing, even on waterfront land endangered by climate change.

We seem to have an unprecedented need for space. The United States Census Bureau reports that, between 1973 and 2008, the average size of new houses soared from 1,660 to 2,519 square feet. Thus, in the tightly knit older neighborhoods of Seattle or Nashville, 1,300 square foot bungalows are razed to make way for 3,000 square foot boxes. In the process, architectural character is lost, the coherence of the community changes and the landfill fills up.

The last point is not insignificant: the negative environmental consequences of teardowns are

manifest. According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), demolition and construction account for 25% of the solid waste that ends up in United States landfills each year. And when a building comes down and its materials are hauled off to the dump, all the energy embedded in them is also lost. This consists of all that was expended in the original production and transportation of the materials, as well as the manpower used to assemble the building.

In Vancouver, a housing and real estate expert reports that the city issued more than 1,000 demolition permits in 2013. She points out that most of the demolitions were of single-family homes, and each sent “more than 50 tons of waste to landfills.”

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One of the ironies of the tear down trend is that the new construction usually features “green” elements such as solar collectors, LED lighting systems, triple-glazed windows, heat sinks and super-insulated walls and roofs. But the bigger new houses encroach upon open space, uprooting mature plantings that benefit air quality, and remove trees that can provide shade and minimize the energy required to cool buildings.

Students of historic architecture know that a house built before 1960 is likely to consist of high quality materials and workmanship; to tear out good old work is wasteful and vandalistic. To replace these houses with new ones that may contain polyvinyl chloride, halogenated flame retardants, formaldehyde, asbestos and volatile organic compounds is the very opposite of “green.”

In fact, the greenest thing a homeowner can do is to live in the old house and to take care of it. Sadly, for those with deep pockets, that is often just not enough.