

# Plot change

Regulations pave way for more controlled teardowns in DuPage County  
[Chicagoland Final Edition]

Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.

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Date: Jul 30, 2006

Start Page: 1

Section: Real Estate

Document Types: Feature

Text Word Count: 1383

## Document Text

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When Tim Lawler sought a new home in the western suburbs, Hinsdale was at the top of his list. With the housing market tight and almost no vacant land, Lawler began to consider acquiring a teardown.

Lawler was hardly the first home seeker to take that tack. Since the mid-1980s, the concept--buying a small home on a desirable piece of property in an older area, tearing it down and building a new (and usually larger) house--has inspired buyers and builders across the country.

This has created the inevitable conflicts between longtime residents and newcomers whose so-called McMansions tower over neighboring homes. Today the fear of bulldozers has been replaced by a 21st Century sensibility that sees some benefits in the teardown phenomenon.

"Without redevelopment opportunities of some kind, a

community could eventually face a stagnant and aging housing stock, increased vacancies, decreasing property values and even unsafe structures in some instances," said John D. Said, director of the Department of Planning, Zoning & Economic Development for Elmhurst.

And as people's attitudes toward teardowns have changed, so has the vocabulary used to describe it. "Redevelopment," "reconstruction" and "rebuilds" are words used, he said, avoiding what he calls "the emotional connotations associated with terms such as teardowns."

Lawler's search led to a 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom Hinsdale ranch built in 1951, a structure he viewed as "functionally obsolete." He replaced it with a four-bedroom, European-style home, choosing a size and stucco exterior that fit with other rebuilt homes on the block.

"This is the way the market responds to houses that have

outlived their usefulness," Lawler said. "Our house is appropriate for the site, and building it is what the market dictates will happen with land values being what they are and with the desirability of the location."

Change is inevitable

In towns where an aging population lives in obsolescent housing on prime land, not only is the growth of a teardown culture inevitable but it's also healthy, said Steven Hovany, president of Strategy Planning Associates, a Schaumburg consulting firm that deals in planning and economic issues, specializing in housing.

"It revitalizes the housing stock and brings in a new group of younger, more affluent people who have their own preferences for eating, drinking and socializing, which in turn revitalizes the towns," Hovany said. "It's healthy for the towns in that it increases the assessed valuation of properties without an increase in the services the village provides."

Accepting the inevitable, villages have found various ways of addressing teardowns:

**Zoning changes.** Naperville's City Council has been working since 1999 with Community First, a grassroots initiative formed to create advisory redevelopment guidelines. In 2005, the city adopted amendments to the municipal code regarding height, lot coverage, easements, construction regulations and stormwater management requirements, among others.

"The task was to be sure the impact on residential neighborhoods wasn't overwhelming in terms of new homes being out of character," said Naperville community planner Suzanne Thorsen.

Glen Ellyn addressed residents' concerns by implementing zoning changes that control the size and height of new houses, said Dale Wilson, building and zoning official.

**Construction regulations.** Clarendon Hills regulates noise and mess. Michael Brown, director of community development there, says the impact of construction was one of neighbors' biggest concerns.

In Burr Ridge, steps taken in the last five years to mitigate the inconvenience and reduce the impact of construction have included fencing requirements and time limits. Builders have one year to complete exterior work on homes and the surrounding property.

"Builders were getting the shell up and then concentrating on the inside and finishing the outside

last. That meant a home could appear to be under construction for a couple of years," said village community development director Doug Pollock. "This has forced them to re-prioritize."

For their part, builders know that being considerate of neighbors can be good for business. Joe Greybar, president of Greyson Properties and Greyson Custom Builders in Western Springs, builds spec and custom homes he calls "location-appropriate."

"The facades we build actually blend in with other homes in the area," he said. "The homes we build aren't jumping in your face saying, 'I don't belong in this area.'"

**Historic districts.** Barrington has one of Illinois' largest historic districts, encompassing more than 370 houses. Still director of building and planning Jim Wallace views teardowns as "a phenomenon in every part of the country where there is healthy economic growth."

But for one of these houses to be considered as a teardown, restoration must not be feasible, Wallace said.

In Elmhurst, anyone wishing to demolish a single-family home in the historic district must get approval from the local Historic Sites Commission. The homes within the historic district are at least 30 years old. That neighborhood is preserved, leaving opportunities for people to redevelop areas outside the historic district.

What else is new?

Village rules and regulations aren't the only things that have changed since the teardown trend began.

Mike Culligan, an architect for 15 years at Culligan, Abraham Architecture in Clarendon Hills, said the dramatic change is the acceptance. "In the beginning, in some communities it was the new house that stuck out like a sore thumb. Now the ones that haven't been torn down are the ones that stick out."

Home styles have changed, too. Tim Thompson of Tim Thompson Custom Homes in Hinsdale said that 25 years ago a standard two-story colonial was home. Now, through Internet, shelter publications and other media, buyers have been exposed to many more architectural styles and have become more sophisticated.

When Mike Moran and his wife needed more room for their four children, they knew what they wanted. The Clarendon Hills family bought a two-bedroom Cape Cod on a large lot, intending to tear it down.

"The new spec homes in the area have a lot of bells and whistles we weren't willing to pay for, and yet we couldn't live in the older homes in the village," Moran said. "So we said, 'Let's build our own home that will meet our needs.'" They built a four-bedroom, 3 1/2-bath home, four-square farmhouse style, with a front porch, cedar exterior siding.

Sellers, too, view teardowns differently, Greybar said. "Some older couples see their homes as having historic value, but in the western suburbs the historic value plays less of a role now when

people recognize how much money they can make."

For help with buying and selling, Xchange Properties, an almost five-year-old company in Clarendon Hills, has a new option. Company president Brian Hickey connects buyers looking for teardowns, with sellers interested in getting the most for their older homes.

"We are brokers offering homeowners, many of whom are seniors living in ranch-style homes that haven't been updated, a means of getting the most out of their largest asset with the least hassle and inconvenience," Hickey said.

Still, not everyone who buys a so-called teardown tears it down. Three years ago Michael McErlean bought a three-bedroom ranch in Hinsdale. He took his wife and two children along on the walkthrough so the sellers, an elderly couple, could see that "a family was looking to buy it, not a guy wearing a hardhat who was looking to tear it down."

"The people had been in the house for 30 years," McErlean said. "They didn't want to see their memories leveled. They wanted to see people enjoying their home." McErlean and his family lived in the house for six months before updating the home, which took 18 months.

"The house works for us in that we have a small family and the structure provides us with all the room we need," he said.

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 3; Caption: PHOTO (color): Tim Lawler of Hinsdale replaced a two-bedroom ranch with this European-style home,

choosing a size and exterior that fit with other rebuilt homes on the block. Photo for the Tribune by Warren Skalski PHOTO (color): Three years ago Michael McErlean bought a three-bedroom ranch in Hinsdale. Instead of tearing it down, he updated the home. 'The people had been in the house for 30 years. They didn't want to see their memories leveled.' -- Michael McErlean (above) Tribune photo by Antonio Perez PHOTO: This Western Springs home was built by Greyson Properties after a smaller home was torn down. Tribune photo by Antonio Perez.

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

[Tim Lawler] of Hinsdale replaced a two-bedroom ranch with this European-style home, choosing a size and exterior that fit with other rebuilt homes on the block. Photo for the Tribune by Warren Skalski Three years ago [Michael McErlean] bought a three-bedroom ranch in Hinsdale. Instead of tearing it down, he updated the home. 'The people had been in the house for 30 years. They didn't want to see their memories leveled.' -- Michael McErlean (above) Tribune photo by Antonio Perez This Western Springs home was built by Greyson Properties after a smaller home was torn down.

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