



Monster Houses? "Yes!" and "No!"

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Robert Lang and Karen Danielsen argue that big infill houses make economic sense. Mark Hinshaw thinks building monster homes is socially irresponsible.

Monster Houses?

Yes!

By Robert E. Lang and Karen A. Danielsen

They make good infill—and they make good economic sense.

Monster houses are easy to hate. Their critics say they promote sprawl and exclusivity. They give them unflattering labels like McMansions and Starter Castles. We are not among those critics. We believe that monster houses, used as infill housing, represent an enormous investment opportunity for many older suburbs and that they can ultimately result in less sprawl.

Although definitions of "monster home" are necessarily subjective, there's no doubt that Americans are building larger and larger houses. According to the 2000 census, median house size increased in the last decade from 5.2 rooms to 5.8 rooms. The percentage of homes with eight or more rooms climbed to 14.6 percent from 13.2 percent, and the number of such homes jumped from 13.5 million to 17 million.

The Census Survey of Construction also shows that the average new home jumped from 1,500 square feet in 1970 to 2,266 square feet in 2000. The median size of a new home climbed from 1,385 square feet in 1970 to 2,057 by 2000. According to data collected by the National Association of Home Builders, only seven percent of new houses exceeded 3,000 square feet in 1984; by 2000, the figure stood at 18 percent.

Monster houses appear throughout the country, but are more commonly found in major metropolitan areas and in some resort communities. They appear most frequently in older parts of high-growth areas, in growth-restricted metropolitan areas, in mature neighborhoods with cache, and in high-tech belts.

Many of these houses are built in established communities. For the new residents, the attraction is the neighborhood's mature landscaping, the local stores within walking distance, the schools' track record. Buyers value these amenities so much that they buy older houses, tear them down, and put up larger ones at great expense.

For some, infill is also a chance to avoid living under the thumb of a homeowners association, where strict covenants regulate building design and homeowner behavior. In contrast, infill monster homes are typically built on fee-simple lots, which provide homeowners maximum freedom. Proponents of building big argue that placing size restrictions on new houses may reduce property values.

Take another look

It's just these infill projects that spur most of the protests. Longtime residents charge that the oversized houses will change the neighborhood's look and feel. Their mass will overwhelm the smaller houses on the block and reduce the supply of relatively affordable housing units.

Others note that out-of-scale houses can result in loss of community character and increase neighbors' property taxes. Existing infrastructure may not be able to handle the larger houses. Also, they say, the

new houses rob the neighborhood of open space and destroy significant vistas. Preservation activists decry the fact that historic houses are being torn down when they could easily have been restored.

We suggest that the critics should take another look. On balance we find that the positives of monster houses outweigh the negatives. Monster houses are a sound way of promoting reinvestment in older suburbs and of making use of existing infrastructure. In many cases, they are replacing obsolete or rundown housing. New construction is likely to increase neighbors' property values and contributes to the community's stability.

Most important, new infill development in existing communities is environmentally sounder and less sprawl-producing than building on the fringe of the metropolitan area. New development allows older, built-out municipalities to capture sorely needed new investment.

As Minnesota state senator Myron Orfield has shown, many mature suburbs are in poor financial shape, especially compared to the newer, more far-flung suburbs. But older suburbs have one key comparative advantage: They offer a sense of place. That's why there is often pressure to find building sites for upscale housing.

Older suburbs are often either fully built-out, or have only scattered small sites available for development. If most residential development took place from the 1920s to 1950s, the houses are probably too small by current tastes to attract higher income households. Typically, houses in older suburbs average just over 1,000 square feet and lack basic features such as garages and family rooms.

In the 1950s, Levittown-style tract houses represented the good life (about 800 square feet), the way a solid station wagon once defined middle-class affluence. But over the past half-century, standards have changed dramatically. Many people now expect luxuries that were once reserved for the rich. This new "super-sized American dream" includes fully loaded SUVs and, yes, monster houses.

Older suburbs that resist monster homes are in danger of becoming fiscal sinkholes—places where taxes keep going up while services decline. Many of the suburbs developed just after World War II are especially vulnerable because most of their revenue comes from residential property taxes. Monster houses offer the opportunity to infuse revenue-stagnant towns with boosted ratables.

Creative compromises

A quick tour through the older suburbs turns up lots of communities where large and small houses are mixed in the same neighborhood, even the same block. In the cities, it's easy to find blocks that began with modest townhouses and then suddenly included big (or even monster) houses. Building monster houses in traditional neighborhoods in city and suburb is consistent with the old urbanism, which mixed incomes and building types.

Planners must find ways to compromise between the interests of those who want to build monster houses and neighborhoods that resist them. Both homeowners and communities can benefit from such a compromise.

There are some important regional variations in lot and house types, which mean that monster home design and zoning innovations need to be locally adapted. For example, house lots on the East Coast are generally larger than ones in the West and have less lot coverage. The West is also more arid and has less foliage. That means that it may be harder to hide a monster home on a typical western lot. In such places, designers need to be more sensitive to the possibility of overwhelming neighbors.

A Midwestern example of creative compromise is Naperville, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. The city worked with residents to develop a guidebook meant to sensitize would-be monster homebuilders and property owners to their neighborhood's character and prominent features, including typical house size.

To ensure maximum flexibility, Naperville uses no formulas to determine lot coverage, and the guidebook fits existing zoning codes. The idea is to have the developer and the prospective teardown homeowner consider the neighborhood context in which they are building.

In contrast, Cresskill, New Jersey, north of New York City on the west side of the Hudson River, earlier this year enacted specific size requirements, limiting house coverage in most of the town to 20 percent of the lot.

A blessing in disguise

Ordinances such as Cresskill's typically reflect intense pressure from local homeowners to control monster house construction. The problem is that such stopgap measures may solve the immediate problem but often create more burdensome regulations for all, not just monster home builders. Residents seeking to add more modest extensions to their houses may now confront strict regulatory barriers that perhaps could compel them to move to bigger quarters elsewhere.

On the whole, monster houses built in older suburbs are consistent with smart growth, a practice that promotes infill over greenfield development. Buyers of large, new, infill houses are actually promoting this policy—although often not consciously. If frustrated in their attempts to live in established neighborhoods, such consumers will likely build their big houses in new suburbs that chew up open space and contribute to sprawl.

Thus, despite the stigma, monster houses may prove a blessing for older suburbs. Planners and architects should consider monster houses a redevelopment tool and work on methods to help communities better manage their placement and design. If planners cannot quite come to love monster homes, perhaps they can at least recognize their potential for bolstering communities.

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Monster Houses?

No!

By Mark L. Hinshaw, FAICP

A commendable example of smart growth? I don't think so.

As an observer of cities and emerging public policy, I am bothered to see behavior that is environmentally and socially irresponsible being repackaged under the smart growth label. Putting on that label gives builders and homeowners alike an excuse for continuing current practices that waste land, energy, and materials. The home building industry has always professed that it is only building what "the market" wants. Personally, I have never found it especially revealing that people who can afford big houses prefer big houses.

And will all this new construction produce a better community. According to the "invisible hand" theory of 18th century economist Adam Smith, individuals acting in their own self-interest will produce a beneficial collective result. But surely by now, with the debacles of e-commerce, devalued stock options and Enron, the poverty of that theory has been thoroughly exposed.

I have no beef with folks who want to live in big houses. I have friends who have bought generously sized lots in verdant suburbs where the scale and bulk of their house is entirely appropriate. But inflicting massively oversized structures on neighborhoods that have an established pattern of small houses on small lots is the epitome of public rudeness.

So some folks would like to move into an established neighborhood, with mature trees and convenience stores close at hand? That's fine, but it shouldn't mean that they get to do so by doing violence to an existing neighborhood.

Moreover, this phenomenon is really the domain (to make a pun) of a relatively small sector of the population: the recently wealthy, people who likely made their fortune during the wild and reckless '90s. These folks want it not both ways, but all ways. A big house (probably with several big cars). A cool neighborhood with hip shops and cafes. Proximity to work. And a nice mature streetscape.

Who's buying?

Communities should not be catering to this kind of *nouveau riche* excess. Instead, they should be finding ways to accommodate the populations that are truly representative of our emerging demographic composition: singles, single-parent households, seniors, and young couples on modest incomes.

The 2000 census confirmed the trend already evident in the 1990 census that these segments of the population, are the fastest growing—not the DINKs (double income/no kids couples) who want monster homes. Right now, such groups comprise fully 50 percent of the American population; in another 10 years they will be 60 percent.

These households do not want, and often cannot afford, huge houses. What they seek is exactly the opposite—modest, low-cost places to live that offer privacy, style, and efficiency. Rather than caving into builders and buyers who want bloated houses, cities should be revising their codes to allow for *smaller* houses.

Ten years ago, Vancouver, British Columbia, sensing a similar demographic shift among Canadians, began to revise its codes. It selected a couple of older, inner-city, suburban-style neighborhoods to take part in a program that would encourage reinvestment, preservation, and affordable housing. A new zoning bylaw allows owners of older homes to convert a portion of the existing structure into a second dwelling unit, sometimes called an "accessory dwelling unit."

But Vancouver did not stop there. The homeowner also would be allowed to build two additional dwellings in the rear yard. Because it is hard to add much more development into an already occupied 6,000 lot, the new dwellings had to be small and, therefore, relatively affordable. The added density could be gained only if the homeowner agreed to preserve the older house and to bring it up to code, and to maintain the front yard in the same mature condition as all the other yards along the street.

The result has been spectacular. Merely by changing codes to reflect the needs of a changing population, the city accomplished multiple objectives. Land was more effectively used. New people were added to the neighborhood, thereby supporting local businesses as well as public transit. The neighborhood was reinvigorated. And the needs of diverse households were met. All without expending a single dollar of public funds. This is a fine example of smart growth in its truest form.

But one need not look to Canada for models of smart growth. In Shoreline, Washington, just north of Seattle, innovative development began to take place almost immediately after the city adopted a thoughtful "cottage housing" ordinance. Across the street from a community college, developer Jim Soules recently completed a development consisting of eight small houses on property that had been previously platted for four expensive "faux chateaux."

Each of the eight houses is less than 1,000 square feet. They all face a gorgeously landscaped green and share access to a "commons house" designed for parties and personal projects. Although only recently completed, most of the houses have already been sold— this in a downmarket period with lots of available housing. They are being sold exactly to the types of people the census identified: singles, single parents, young couples, and semi-retireds.

Despite including many amenities such as hardwood flooring, custom cabinets, and skylights, Soules has kept the sales prices close to that of the average new home in the metropolitan region. He accomplished this by making more efficient use of the property and eschewing the excessively large floor areas found in typical “builder homes.”

Architect Ross Chapin worked with Soules to design houses that draw their inspiration from handcrafted cabins and the modest, but gracious dwellings that we associate with small towns and traditional streets. The deftly proportioned houses feel like a small village. They fit comfortably into a surrounding neighborhood of older, detached homes.

Soules and Chapin also managed to incorporate into the development a number of features that reflect principles and techniques of “green building.” Again, this is the type of development that truly deserves to be called smart growth.

A better way

Some older suburban neighborhoods could indeed benefit from infill development. But that doesn’t mean we should insert jarring new buildings into the older setting.

A better approach is to craft a simple set of standards to ensure that everyone benefits—not just the newcomers. For example, communities could apply the well-used regulatory tool of floor area ratio to single-family lots. I would suggest that an FAR of .5 is more than ample for most neighborhoods. In other words, to put up a 5,000-square-foot house, the homeowner or developer would have to find a 10,000-square-foot lot.

There’s another way to ensure compatibility between older homes and newer ones. That is for cities to adopt guidelines that address qualitative design elements, ranging from tree preservation to minimum roof pitch. In Bozeman, Montana, for example, a design review board evaluates new and renovated single-family houses within designated “conservation districts” to make sure that the new construction maintains neighborhood character and value.

Such approaches reflect the tenets of smart growth. They encourage infill development that meets multiple community goals: neighborhood preservation, compact land-use patterns, and housing affordability. Trying to associate monster homes with this growing movement may be a clever marketing ploy, but smart growth it is not.

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