University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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May, 2002

Monster houses? Yes! No!

Robert E Lang, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Karen A. Danielsen, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Monster Yes!

By Robert E. Lang and Karen A Danielsen

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

"Building monster houses in traditional neighborhoods in city and suburb is consistent with the old urbanism, which mixed incomes and building types," says these proponents.

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.

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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 those 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 home 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.