

The great American single-family home problem

By Conor Dougherty, New York Times

BERKELEY — The house at 1310 Haskell Street does not look worthy of a bitter neighborhood war. The roof is rotting, the paint is chipping, and while the lot is long and spacious, the backyard has little beyond overgrown weeds and a garage sprouting moss.

The owner was known for hoarding junk and feeding cats, and when she died three years ago the neighbors assumed that whoever bought the house would be doing a lot of work. But when the buyer turned out to be a developer, and when that developer floated a proposal to raze the building and replace it with a trio of small homes, the neighborhood erupted in protest.

Most of the complaints were what you might hear about any development. People thought the homes would be too tall and fretted that more residents would mean fewer parking spots.

Whatever the specifics, what is happening in Berkeley may be coming soon to a neighborhood near you. Around the country, many fast-growing metropolitan areas are facing a brutal shortage of affordable places to live, leading to gentrification, homelessness, even disease. As cities struggle to keep up with demand, they have remade their skylines with condominium and apartment towers — but single-family neighborhoods, where low-density living is treated as sacrosanct, have rarely been part of the equation.

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