

Teardown trend crunches along

About 1,800 Tampa homes have bitten the dust in six years, the frumpy making way for the fabulous.

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TAMPA - Matt Wichman stands outside his house and watches as Keith Steward maneuvers a backhoe in the driveway.

In just 30 minutes, Wichman's home will be reduced to rubble.

"My final salute to it," he reflects.

Like so many homes in South Tampa, Wichman's house on Tennyson Avenue is another casualty of the teardown trend.

In the past six years, demolition companies have leveled more than 1,770 homes throughout the city.

Many of them are in established South Tampa neighborhoods, such as Wichman's in Sunset Park, where the land value often surpasses the house value. In those cases, home buyers and builders pay top dollar for lots, flatten the existing homes and build bigger, better ones in their places.

"You can almost drive down any street in South Tampa and somebody is tearing something down," said Pete Carlin, owner of Carlin Construction, which will build a new home for Wichman on the lot.

Carlin hired Sonny Glasbrenner Inc., a demolition and concrete recycling company in Clearwater, to knock down Wichman's home.

Of the 400 jobs Glasbrenner does each year, about 30 percent are in Hillsborough County, said John Varrati, controller for Glasbrenner. Nearly all of them are in South Tampa.

The purchase price of a teardown house varies, depending on location and lot size. It could cost as much as \$175,000 in Palma Ceia, where lots are small, or up to \$400,000 in Beach Park, where lots are big. Waterfront real estate can fetch more than \$1-million.

"A teardown is the lowest priced house in any neighborhood - a distressed house on a great lot," said Jackie Colson-Miller, a South Tampa real estate agent for RealWorks.

Some sellers know they own a teardown and market the home as such. They may point out that their large lot could hold a much bigger home and note the size of surrounding new homes. Colson-Miller advises those clients not to spend a lot of money to pretty up the property for selling.

Other owners consider their orange shag carpeting, acoustic-tile ceilings and weathered walls charming. Potential buyers need to handle those folks with care so as not to offend them.

"An elderly couple that has lived in their house for 40 years is very proud of their house, so they would never think of their house as a teardown," Colson-Miller said.

In those cases, she advises buyers not to talk about their plans to call in wrecking crews.

"What you're doing is ripping apart the history of a couple, and it would just shatter them," she said.

Wichman's home holds some of his fondest memories. He bought the house 10 years ago when he was 29. Since then, he has gotten married, had a baby and has another on the way.

It was time for a change. Time for demolition.

"I made my peace with it with a moment of silence in there," he said on a recent Monday afternoon before the backhoe began its work.

He plans to build a new house on his lot, where he'll live with his family and, no doubt, start working on new memories.

ANATOMY OF A TEARDOWN

To get a demolition permit from the city of Tampa, homeowners must get written confirmation from the city's water and sewer departments, the gas company, TECO and Verizon that each utility has disconnected wires or pipes. A city inspector visits the property to determine how trees on the parcel need to be protected and whether a fence needs to be put up to contain rubble. Properties more than 50 years old also require a review from the city's historic preservation office to ensure the structure should not be protected.

Permitting typically takes three to four weeks. The cost of a demolition permit in Tampa, only \$35, is less expensive than in other cities. Clearwater, for example, charges a flat fee plus a square-footage rate, putting the permit cost at several hundred dollars.

In the case of Wichman's house, the demolition company handled all the paperwork. In other cases, the homeowner or builder takes care of it.

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