



BILLY RENKI

# A Case of the Nashville Demolition Blues

Margaret Renki  
NASHVILLE

**T**HERE'S a mechanized tyrannosaur biting a hole in the roof of my mother's last house. It moves hesitantly, lifting its heavy head and widening its serrated jaws before clamping down, then nosing around a little bit, finding purchase between bites, backing up and moving forward to accommodate its long reach, its powerful orange neck swinging right and left to bump walls that stubbornly refuse to fall. I stand at the edge of the yard and watch my mother's house reduced to rubble.

It stood directly across the street from my mine — I could see it from the window of my home office — but I almost missed the demolition. Between the nail guns of the framing crew five doors down and the blaring radio of the masonry crew on the other side of the street, more than half the house was gone before I even noticed. You would think the noise of a whole house falling into dust would make an instant impression, but I have lived with so much construction noise, and for so many years, I've gotten good at tuning it out.

There's a kind of heartbreak that comes of watching whole swaths of houses scraped from a neighborhood,

but this particular heartbreak is in no way tied to issues of historic preservation. The original houses were small brick rectangles, less lovely than a double-wide mobile home. Built after World War II for working-class servicemen buying on the G.I. Bill, each house followed one of two simple floor plans, with small variations — a covered stoop on some, a gable on others — to make them distinguishable from one another.

When my husband and I moved here in 1995, we had a small son and a baby on the way. Back then, there were only a handful of young families on this block. Most of the houses were occupied by the original postwar owners aging in place or by couples buying starter homes. As families grew, they mostly moved away, and a new young couple would take their place.

It's a neighborhood of old shade trees, a quiet street with no through traffic. When our boys took their first solo rides on two-wheeler bikes, all the dog-walking and stroller-pushing neighbors would cheer them along their route, helping them up after the inevitable crash and comforting them till one of us could catch up.

Is it any wonder that we refused to move away? As our families grew, we would close in the garage, add a little

room off the back, dormer the low attic — anything to keep from leaving our friends. My husband and I added on twice: a family room after our third child was born, an extra bedroom when my father needed help between chemotherapy treatments. One of our older neighbors would watch these amendments under way and shake his head: "There y'all go again, driving up my property taxes." When he moved to a condo across the county line, a single mom with an infant promptly bought his house.

Over the years, our neighborhood became uncommonly close. Our children roamed in packs, our dogs drank from one another's water bowls, our holiday caroling ended in too much wine and children hyped on Christmas cookies and insufficient supervision.

The simplicity of the original houses meant that if a couple divorced, it was almost always possible for one of the parents to buy the other out, and the kids could stay here with us, a steady support system during a season of cataclysmic change. Older neighbors died, and we prayed at their funerals and checked on

their grieving spouses. When my mother was no longer able to live on her own, it was nothing less than a miracle that the rental house across the street became available. She couldn't afford an assisted-living facility, but here she didn't need one. We assisted her.

In time, "adding on" came to mean extensive whole-house makeovers. But these 70-year-old houses were already crumbling, unsuited for renovations on such a scale, and that's when my neighbors began to tear their own houses down. If you need more room and don't want to move — and if property values have grown so high that moving makes less sense anyway — why not tear a wobbly old house down and move in with your parents while a new house rises in its place?

I love my neighbors, and I'm always relieved when a family here decides to stay. But I didn't understand that when our oldest neighbors began to die, real estate developers would swoop in to tear the old houses down, building monstrous new houses on spec and cashing out in a metropolitan area growing by a hundred people a day.

My old neighborhood isn't recognizable anymore, and neither is this city, my home for more than 30 years. There are reasons to celebrate growth, and I don't want to be like the cranky old neighbor who complained that we were driving up his property taxes without acknowledging that we were also increasing his property's value. I know it's nothing less than a luxury to live here. Most people would love to live in a place where the biggest problem is that the old trees keep dying, their roots covered in concrete and cinder block.

But something crucial is lost when a community becomes a place where people can't afford to live in the same country where they work. Something important is lost when a neighborhood becomes a place where only the well off live — where a single parent will never again buy a house, where a schoolteacher will never again buy a house, where there's no little rental house for a lonely widow to move into, right across the street from her daughter. □

**The city's building boom is sweeping through my beloved neighborhood.**

MARGARET RENKI is a contributing opinion writer.