



Houses: Moving them beats losing them

BY JOHN ABRAMS

Affordable housing on the move. Not long ago, this 1860s Victorian on Martha's Vineyard (above) simply would have been torn down to make room for a larger home. But thanks to some creative thinking, the island's affordable-housing organization now has a way to pay for moving and renovating these old beauties.

Thanks to fax machines, email, and the Internet, more people can earn a living in beautiful, out-of-the-way places. Hence the beautiful places are under great pressure, like Martha's Vineyard, where I live. Most of the desirable land is built on. Smaller homes are torn down to make room for bigger ones. And housing costs have risen to a point where carpenters and teachers can't afford to live here. As a builder of custom homes, I have an advanced degree in being part of this problem.

The problem is loss of community. Affordable housing is the ballast of a community. Without it, some people are forced to move away, and the structure of community tips over. Continuity of generations and economic diversity are essential for keeping a place whole. These factors keep stories and traditions alive, and they maintain an understanding of the land and the climate.

Martha's Vineyard is a rarefied place, but it's like an indicator species. Problems that appear

here first eventually spread elsewhere. I've talked about affordable housing in towns all over New England. Everywhere I go, I hear the same story: Desirability trumps affordability. And I hear people's despair. They say that it's impossible to make a difference; the real-estate pressures are too great.

But British business philosopher Charles Handy casts a different perspective: "Cathedrals inspire. Those who first worked on them knew for certain that they would never see them finished. We may not need any more cathedrals, but we do need cathedral thinkers, people who can think beyond their own lifetimes."

Affordable housing is not a problem that will respond to a single solution or a short-term burst of energy. We need a variety of approaches, and we need to share them. Good models can have remarkable impact.

A tax deduction keeps houses out of the landfill

Some years ago, the Island Affordable Housing Fund

(IAHF) was created to tackle this problem. The IAHF is a nonprofit organization that raises money to provide grants and technical assistance to increase the supply of year-round affordable housing on Martha's Vineyard. The group's plan springs from fundamental principles:

- Use existing buildings as much as possible.
- Create many small-scale, scattered site opportunities rather than a few large-scale projects.
- Respect environmental and neighborhood concerns.
- Promote long-term affordability through deed restrictions and land trusts.
- And serve long-term residents first.

Several years ago, as chairman of the IAHF, I began to get calls from people wanting to donate entire houses if we would move them. When land becomes as scarce and pricey as it is in our community, the value of the land comes to exceed the value of the house located on it. People begin to tear down perfectly

good houses and replace them with their dream house. Offering to donate the houses rather than tear them down was a generous, reasonable idea. Ironically, we couldn't accept the of-

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fer because it's far too expensive to develop land, move a house, and renovate it. The cost is not much different than building new. So the houses were demolished and hauled to the landfill, and the island continued to hemorrhage good people for lack of affordable housing.

Then we had a brainstorm: The funding mechanism was right there, embodied in the houses. Now when someone wants to donate a house, we say: “Here's the deal. You donate your house to the nonprofit IAHF. We'll get your house appraised to determine the value of your charitable donation, and we'll move the house. But you have to contribute, in cash, the grossed-up tax benefit you will receive so that we will have the money it takes to do the work.”

In a nutshell, people donate both the house and the tax deduction they get for making a charitable contribution. The concept takes people aback at first, but after consulting a tax professional, most agree, as long as they're in a position to take

advantage of the tax breaks that can be used over five years.

Recently, one substantial house was assessed at \$244,000, not including the land, because that would not be donated. The tax benefit to the owner turned out to be 52%. The IAHF received a check for \$127,000.

Homeowners are paying only what they're saving, and in addition, they're saving the cost of demolition and disposal of these buildings, which is not inconsequential. They also get to provide a community service. Everyone comes out ahead, and the approach is entirely legal.

Moving houses takes time

In preindustrial New England, when the cost of materials was

prohibitive, buildings were moved with astonishing frequency. Teams of oxen moved at just the right speed. The mayor of Portsmouth, N.H., once complained that buildings were being moved around “like

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checkers on a checkerboard.” Today, moving a building is an unusual, dramatic event, but we still move it at the same speed: about as fast as a person can walk.

More and more houses on the Vineyard are being scheduled

for removal. It’s exciting to survey these houses because each has different problems and potential. Each situation is unique. We have to assess the overall condition of the building and the way its location will affect the move. We cruise each transport route, measuring and looking for obstacles. The beautiful overhanging tree canopies that we love to see on country roads are the house mover’s nightmare. We have to consider whether we can split the house in half to make it narrower, or split it horizontally if it’s too tall, depending on road conditions.

A major problem is that it takes a long time to assemble projects, find land, develop it, and move houses. Moving houses down narrow country

roads and through tightly packed villages full of traffic and overhead wires is a complex undertaking. Homeowners aren’t always willing to wait so long for removal.

Eventually, the IAHF would like to persuade towns to set aside land for storage of houses. Then we could have used-house lots, and when a young couple finally gets their land and is ready to build, they’ll be able to inspect the houses, point, and say, “We’ll take that one.” Then house movers can drive it off the lot for them. How about that?

A lottery winner gets to stay on the island

Recently, the Town of Edgartown, the IAHF, and South

Mountain Company (the design/build company that I am part of) collaborated on a project that made use of this unusual resource. Four homes were moved to a cluster of

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town-owned parcels of land. The homes were sold at remarkably low prices and were equipped with perpetual limited-equity deed restrictions to guarantee that they’ll be affordable forever. The new homeowners were chosen through a lottery, carefully con-

ducted by the town, of qualified local residents.

One of the lottery winners was a dignified, white-haired gentleman in his early 60s who had been the head custodian in one of the local schools for years. He’d had a longtime year-round rental, lost it when his landlord decided to sell, and thought he would have to leave the island where he had lived for 19 years. It was a great moment when his name was drawn out of the hat to receive one of the houses. He was overwhelmed with joy and relief and broke down in tears as we were interviewing him for an IAHF video.

Not long afterward, I called and asked him to testify in support of another affordable-

housing project at a public hearing. He said he would be happy to. I told him I was planning to show the video and that it might be a bit embarrassing for him. He said that it would be, but he’d be there anyway.

He said, “You know, these days it’s okay for a grown man to cry. I cried when my name was drawn. I’ll cry again at the closing. And I’ll cry the first time I walk through the door of my new home.”

John Abrams is a cofounder of South Mountain Company in West Tisbury, Mass. This essay was adapted from his new book, The Company We Keep (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005).