



REAL ESTATE

# Deeds & Don'ts

by Susan Nova

INSIDE STORIES BEHIND AREA REAL ESTATE DEALS

## RETURN OF THE GREAT ESTATES

The phenomenon of tear-downs became evident in Connecticut in the mid-1980's, as the supply of buildable acreage began to dwindle. From a modest cottage to a monastery, from a farmhouse to a multi-million dollar manor house on the Long Island Sound, every type of residence has been razed in Fairfield County in recent years.

In their place, homebuyers are erecting the Medici palaces of the 21st century, variously referred to as McMansions, trophy mansions and starter castles. It's the real estate version of the Aladdin tale of new lamps for old. Interior square

footage continues to swell, but land size stays the same. Many of these dream homes run visually and virtually along almost the entire road frontage, or they are designed in an L-shape to squeeze more architecture onto the acreage.

"It's very challenging to build an aesthetically interesting house on some of these properties due to all of the town restrictions," explains custom builder Scott Hobbs, whose New Canaan firm bears his family name. Styles vary, but in the Northeast, there are a lot of Shingle Styles, Georgians and Colonials, and there's been a re-emergence of Modern, Contemporary and Arts and Crafts styles.



## FIGHTS BREW OVER DEVELOPMENT

Residents of Norwalk's Cranbury section have reached across town lines and joined their neighbors in Westport to fight overdevelopment. At the heart of the controversy is the famous White Barn Theater and adjacent property. Located on 18 acres at the corner of Newtown Avenue and Cranbury Road in Norwalk, the property was bequeathed by actress Lucille Lortel to her theater foundation. Its trustees are now proposing a cluster home development and possibly a school on the site. However, the property is also home to a section of Stony Brook, a pond, a meadow and wetlands. A half mile away, the 56-acre Partrick Wetlands is also threatened with development of 22 clustered houses on nine acres. —H.C.C.



**Days Gone By** | This gentleman's farm in New Canaan is protected by a deed of conservation and preservation under the auspices of Historic New England.

Existing houses are just too small to accommodate the luxuries that are now standard issue. Smaller homes could be remodeled with extensive add-ons, but it's less expensive to start over. Costs of demolition are relatively modest, about one percent of the total cost of the entire project, if there are no hazardous materials, Hobbs explains.

Financial industry execs and corporate titans come here to expend their newly-minted fortunes on instant-status showplaces, and ever more developers are surging into the county to make their fortunes building them. The developers' first choice frequently is to build from the ground up, and the new American aristocracy often goes the same route.

Price no longer seems of concern. Homes ranging up to \$10 million have been scraped into dust. As long as the location is desirable, even the land doesn't have to be the best. Inconvenient hillsides are gouged out, cliffs ripped down and unwanted rock ledge blasted to oblivion.

Between July 1, 2003 and June 30, 2004, the number of demolition permits sought in Greenwich alone hit a record 200, although some were probably for accessory structures. The prior high was 132, three years ago.

This isn't the first time tear-downs have been in vogue, but adaptive reuse was often part of the equation in the past. At the turn of the 20th century,



**Brick House** | This restored Gothic Victorian in Darien, built for Henry D. Weed in 1871, is listed for sale at \$4.895 million.