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In the rush to rebuild, one topic is taboo: What should be built differently — or not at all?

Wind-whipped embers fly over a home on Vinedo Avenue during the Eaton fire on Jan. 7, 2025, in Altadena. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

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Jan. 22, 2025 3 AM PT

Even as the wildfires still raged, the impulse to quickly restore two devastated communities to what they once were became a political imperative.

First Gov. Gavin Newsom, then Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass, issued orders designed to speed the rebuilding of damaged and destroyed homes by stripping away bureaucratic and regulatory obstacles.

As urgent as that show of determination felt to many, it has critics among architects, urban planners and academics who would rather see public officials slow down and think deliberately about how to make the communities more resistant to future fires — and contribute more to the region's affordable housing needs.

"If we just build back the way it was, it's definitely a missed opportunity," said Liz Falletta, an architect and professor in the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy. "It's a missed opportunity to think differently about these things."

More bluntly, Mark Ryavec, a former L.A. City Council legislative analyst and now acerbic critic of City Hall, is calling for a dead stop on rebuilding in Pacific Palisades "without first examining what happened there and applying lessons that may be learned to reform building codes and significantly increase the capacity of the local firefighting water system."

The orders “will allow property owners to more quickly start rebuilding — with the same building materials and fire safety requirements that failed to protect over 10,000 homes,” he said in an opinion piece.

Unlike so many disasters that ripped through communities randomly, taking out one home and leaving the one next door intact, the Palisades and Eaton fires — in wiping out whole neighborhoods — created blank slates that could be redesigned from the ground up.

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Jan. 19, 2025

Tucked away in semirural settings away from the urban core, both communities, despite their dramatic demographic differences, share an insularity that engendered strong identities and also made them vulnerable.

Besides attention to fire-resistant construction, ideas being floated to reshape the two communities include creating more common space and greater distance between houses, improving street patterns and swapping out popular but fire-prone vegetation.

Alexandra Syphard, senior research scientist at the Conservation Biology Institute in Oregon, said studies have shown, for instance, that California oaks are more capable of absorbing embers without igniting than staples such as eucalyptus and palms.

Along with the building code enhancements that are likely to emerge after these fires, change could come through land use innovations such as buying out landowners who don’t want to rebuild, putting restrictions on investors and swapping development rights.

One repeated theme is adding multifamily housing to make the communities more economically diverse and help alleviate the region’s affordable housing shortage.

In California Planning & Development Report, contributing editor Josh Stephens proposed adding two- and three-story apartments to the Palisades commercial district where side streets are “filled with shops, cafes, and small offices that, for lack of a better word, are a lot cuter than California’s typical commercial strips are.”

“If European cities are any guide, it can come back even livelier and more uplifting than it once was,” Stephens wrote.

Dowell Myers, a specialist in urban growth and societal change at the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, isn’t advocating delay.

“The housing situation is so desperate we don’t want any dilly-dallying,” Myers said.

But he does advocate for more density.

“You really need to have more multifamily,” he said. “L.A. is suburban density built out to the sea. It isn’t viable for a 21st century metropolis.”

Myers, who lives close to the Altadena fire zone, said he thinks his community would welcome it, especially if it were designed for seniors and young families that can’t afford to buy.

“That would be a socially desirable and appealing trade-off,” he said.

“I don’t think you want to threaten the heart of their neighborhood, but certainly on the commercial corridors, why not put multifamily there?”

Among these commentators, however, there was a common pessimism about the likelihood that their ideas can be realized.

“The forces that made it hard to do things new and different in the past are still with us — insurance and mortgage underwriting standards, planning and zoning, risk-averse developers, NIMBYism,” Falletta said.

“The difficult part is making everybody whole, both financially and emotionally,” said former Ventura Mayor Bill Fulton, now a professor of practice in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the Design Lab at UC San Diego.

Fulton compares the situation to the aftermath of the 1991 Oakland Hills firestorm that destroyed nearly 3,000 single-family homes. An immediate call to prohibit rebuilding in the same location faltered under a barrage of TV coverage of people who had lost everything.

Most probably, there will be property owners in both Pacific Palisades and Altadena who decide to take their insurance money, if they are insured, and move elsewhere. (A 2018 state law bars the insurance industry’s previous practice of requiring policyholders to rebuild on the same site.)

Stephanie Pincetl, a professor in the UCLA Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, sees potential to use their properties as leverage for community change by applying transfer of development rights, or TDR, a process in which a property owner would sell their right to rebuild to a developer who would be allowed to build above the allowable density somewhere else, such as the Palisades’ commercial district.

“Rebuilding in the same place and, by and large, in the same way is not in the public interest,” Pincetl said.

Something similar to development rights transfers has become a key element in the recovery of Paradise, Calif., the foothill town almost completely destroyed in the 2018 Camp fire.

Paradise commissioned a study that found the new community could reduce its fire risk 75% with three layers of protection: an exterior buffer of nonflammable vegetation, selective rebuilding in the least fire-prone areas and compliance of individual homes with the wildfire program designed by the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety.

The city is seeking state and federal grants to buy up properties to be left vacant and has also received donations from owners who have decided to not return.

“We want you guys to know down there that there’s another jurisdiction that went through this and you are not alone,” said Paradise Irrigation District Manager Kevin Phillips.

Fulton said he is skeptical that the TDR process would work in Los Angeles because new city and state laws already give density bonuses to stimulate development.

“You could in theory buy some people out if they were willing to sell, and build something taller,” Fulton said. “You’d have to have money.”

Ryavec proposes that the city come up with the money to acquire sites for mini fire breaks, more fire stations and reservoirs.

How these ideas would be received in the communities could vary.

Barbara Broide, Westside Neighborhood Council Land Use Committee chair, scorned density advocates who “seek to do away with single-family homes and the zoning for those neighborhoods. That agenda continues to rest beneath the surface of many of these conversations.”

“This is not a time to let the ideologues prevail,” said Martin Muoto, founder and chief executive of the affordable housing developer SoLa Impact, whose Palisades home burned to the ground.

Muoto said he could imagine new apartments in the commercial district of the Palisades to provide affordable housing for some of the domestic staff employed there.

“The Gelson’s, for example, could be rebuilt for ground-floor grocery and three or four stories of affordable housing,” he said.

But he sees any lot-swap plan as a threat. The well-to-do and resourceful residents are important to the city’s tax base and cultural life, but they have options, he said. L.A. would be poorer if they give up on the city in large numbers.

“I know personally of half a dozen people who are debating moving to a second home in Utah or a second home in Colorado,” Muoto said. “We don’t want them to flee. We don’t want them to go to Florida.

“My position is it is critically important to give the families whose lives have been devastated by tragedy certainty, clarity and speed.”

In Altadena, Town Council Chair Victoria Knapp also worries that longtime residents will abandon the community, but her concern is focused on speculators making lowball offers that low-income Black and Latino families may find hard to refuse.

“We have multigenerational families that own plots of land together,” Knapp said. “If they just sell it all, they can go somewhere else and start over.”

Knapp said she thinks the community would welcome more multifamily housing if it goes in the right place, specifically the small-business zones scattered through the community.

“That is possible,” she said. “But we have to plan it. We’re too soon to determine what Altadena 2.0 would look like but not too soon to prevent it from being something we don’t want it to be.”

The goals of rebuilding to protect against future fires and to serve broader civic interests are treated as unrelated, or even contradictory, Syphard of the Biology Conservation Institute said.

“We have a housing crisis in California,” Syphard said. “In terms of fire-safe housing, people talk about them in two different conversations. We need to start bringing them into the same conversation.”

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