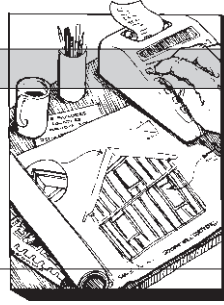


A Lot of Opportunity

by Richard Lind



Non-conforming, single-lot opportunities come about in two ways: You look really hard to find them, or they just fall into your lap. In my case, one came to my attention by luck, but it illustrates perfectly how to deal with an unusual lot and even how to recognize one that is easily overlooked.

The phone call came out of the blue one summer night. "Would you be interested in a building lot in your area that I would like to sell?" It was a small (11,000 square feet), non-conforming but legal building lot in an established neighborhood of larger lots. An absentee, retired builder was trying to sell it.

You bet I was interested. I knew of the property but was a bit surprised to learn it was a building lot. Over the years, its small size led me to assume it was excess land owned by a neighbor. The lot had many favorable features: Soil conditions were excellent and contours fine, municipal sewer and water were available, the neighborhood was better than average, and the price was right. Best of all was the seller's flexibility. "Don't worry about the money," he said. "Pay me when the house is sold or when you can." Even the least experienced builder would recognize those statements as a pretty strong plus in any equation. We agreed that after a \$1,000 down payment, the balance could be secured by a second mortgage, due when the house was sold.

To Buy or Not To Buy

So, with all that going for it, why did I come close to passing up the deal after months of consideration? The lot was an irregular shape—long and narrow, with a frontage of only 40 feet on a busy street and a rear lot line of 60 feet that fronted on another street (see illustration). The rear of the lot had a steep incline up to the street, precluding entry from that direction. The abutting properties were a contrast. While the one on the right looked like a page out of *Better Homes and Gardens*, the property on the left was less than attractive and had little natural vegetation as a screen.

All these factors led to two key questions: First, could the lot be developed within the legal setback requirements? The answer was yes. By shoe-horning a 24x36-foot foundation without any jogs into the center of the lot, I could maintain the minimum 20-foot setbacks. Second, could the lot, once developed, sell? That was much more difficult to answer because of the problem fitting a garage. I was reluctant to build a house in that neighborhood without any garage, but an attached garage was out of the question, and the lot did not lend itself to a basement-level garage.

That summer and throughout the fall, I walked the lot countless times, examining different approaches, possibilities, and solutions, to no avail. The big break came not while studying the lot, but while discussing my dilemma with the secretary at the

building inspector's office. "Did you ever consider a detached garage?" she asked. "In this town you can place a garage within 6 feet of a boundary if it is separated from the main dwelling by 20 feet."

The Missing Piece

I hadn't considered such a solution for one simple reason: I was unaware of the provision in the zoning laws.

That was the missing piece of the puzzle. We drew our plan and put the

The garage—in addition to acting as a screen—provided a winter wind break and a buffer against traffic noise. The 100-foot house setback and triple-glazed windows further reduced noise infiltration.

Placement of the house foundation on a southwest/northeast axis created a benefit we hadn't planned for. Prevailing warm-weather winds in our part of the country come from the southwest, so the large louvers in both gable ends of the house provided continuous natural attic ventilation. Another pleasant surprise came just in time for showing the completed house, when vegetation that had been bare throughout construction flourished, adding to the small lot's privacy.

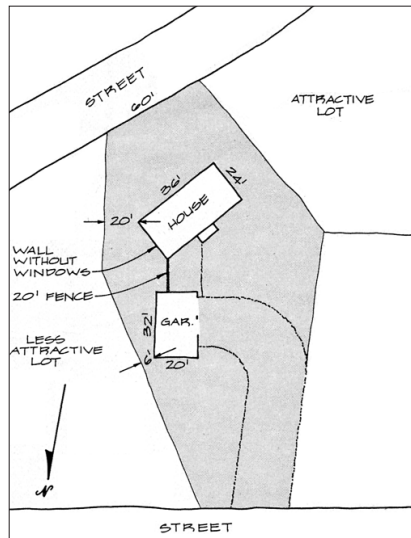
The effort was successful. The rather attractive home with an unusual site plan sold quickly.

Lessons Learned

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this episode:

- A good site plan doesn't have to cost money or require great experience, but it does take a lot of thought, planning, and study.
- Be thoroughly conversant with the zoning codes in your area, so that when opportunity strikes, you will know your alternatives instantly.
- Don't make assumptions when facts are available. Check out zoning maps, plot plans, and plats to make determinations.
- Seek advice from people who know their business.
- When a single lot becomes available in an established area, watch your step and ask questions. Not every single scattered lot has a problem, but many do—that's often why they were bypassed. In our case, the problem was apparent, but similar lots could have such problems as poor soil conditions, questionable access to utilities, or a deed restriction or easement that would hinder development.
- Don't wait for opportunities to find you. Get out of your truck to get a really good look at the areas where you work. Schedule some time, perhaps on a weekend, to go for long walks or bike rides. The building-site possibilities that show up when you're not zipping by at 45 mph will astonish you. ■

Richard Lind has been a builder in the Wellesley, Mass., area for more than 30 years.



With a little extra effort and imagination, the author was able to turn a long-neglected small piece of land into an attractive house lot. The garage, stockade fence, and windowless wall on the northeast side shielded the house from an unattractive lot next door.

foundations in before the cold weather.

The 24x36-foot foundation went in the only place it could go—in the center of the lot, 100 feet back from the street, as shown in the illustration. Next came an oversized, 22x32-foot garage, which was placed the required 20 feet from the house and 6 feet from the sideline, leaving sufficient room to bring a curved drive from the street. The result was a rather pleasing courtyard effect between the house and the drive. Brick pavers placed between the house and garage made a nice patio, with an 8-foot stockade fence on one side to connect the house and garage.

The unattractive property to the left ceased being an issue. We combined three elements to create an effective 76-foot screen: 32 feet of garage, 20 feet of stockade fence, and 24 feet of house side without windows. The position of the house was perfect for this combination of aesthetics and energy conservation. What better direction to eliminate windows and openings in the wall than the north-northeast? Not wanting a dark house, we added windows and glass to the south-facing rear and Southwest facing elevations. The extra glass, besides brightening the interior, increased solar heat gain and focused attention on the attractive property on the side.