

BY JON VARA



1. When the city of Alameda, Calif., took a strip of his property to widen the street, the builder of this spite house struck back at a neighbor who favored the wider street by erecting a 10x50-foot two-story home on the remaining scrap of land.

2. This spite house in Seattle is a compact 15 feet wide across the front, but tapers to less than 5 feet wide at the back, as shown here (yellow house). Enter the geographical coordinates *47°38'19"N, 122°18'5.5"W* into the Google Earth search box to see its peculiar wedge-shaped outline from above.

3. The 8-foot-wide O'Reilly Spite House in West Cambridge, Mass., memorializes the abutting landowner's refusal to offer a reasonable price for the land on which it sits.

4. The history of the Skinny House in Boston's North End is sketchy, but it's said to have been the builder's way of putting the squeeze on his brother, who had previously built a much larger house on the back portion of the same jointly-owned lot.

Spite Houses

Building a new house is ordinarily a cheerful, upbeat activity for all concerned, suggestive of good economic times and happy families.

But new construction can have a darker side: When a feud between neighbors spills over into architecture, the result is a so-called "spite house"—a structure built specifically to cut off an enemy's daylight, view, or access to the street.

Thanks to modern building codes and zoning, building a true spite house like one of those shown here—all of which have long outlived their disgruntled builders—would be all but impossible today. And while that's a clear loss for future architectural historians, it's certainly good news for homeowners with ornery neighbors.

JLC contributing editor Jon Vara lives in Cabot, Vt.