



BRENDAN CHARTERS



STAY IN YOUR LANE, PAL

Laneways, now are for more than just vehicles and vermin

Toronto has a housing problem; some call it a crisis. One of the levers Council is pulling at to increase more urban housing options (a pilot project) is to construct laneway houses in rear yards that abut public lanes.

BEYOND THE BASEMENT

There are 2,433 lanes in the city of Toronto and since June 2018, residents have been able to plan for and build these secondary suites, in a (somewhat) detached fashion from the main dwelling. Essentially, it shifts the previously permitted basement apartment to move up and behind the principal dwelling, so long as the services are provided from the main building, and the lot is not severed. It's a practice that has been allowed in many other metropolitan centres for some time. Cities such as Vancouver, Los Angeles and even Ottawa have had similar bylaws and a plethora of interesting solutions already successfully resided in. Over the past year, however, the Building Department reports there have only been 78 permits applied for and six permissions issued. The goal of the bylaw was to allow for quicker and easier action by Torontonians, but given its connection to the city's more complex makeup of other governing bylaws, 15 other applications are awaiting Committee of Adjustment hearings for minor relief to the rules. That alone can add more than six months to the approval process, so seeing this put into any significant practice will take some time.

LIVABLE LANES

So, who benefits from this pilot project, you ask? Potentially, anyone and everyone. Adding laneway housing brings eyeballs to the lanes, which increases safety of persons living in or passing through them. The city benefits from an increased tax base and the (hopefully) good news story about gentle density, increased housing choices and improved stock – therefore improved affordability.

Who is laneway housing good for? Potentially anyone and everyone. Here is a quick list of who may find it a solution to their needs.

- **ADULT KIDS** – a great launching pad to help teach these birds to fly.
- **AGING PARENTS** – retaining independence of space, but safety and security of proximity to loved ones.
- **FIRST-TIME OR MOVE-UP BUYERS** – help qualify for and pay down the mortgage with a tenant in the main dwelling or the lane house.
- **REAL ESTATE SIDE HUSTLERS AND SMALL DEVELOPERS** – a way to maximize the value of a lot with some extra construction.
- **CAREGIVERS OR PERSONAL SERVICE WORKERS** – live-in-style care with a live-out feeling.
- **RETIREES DOWNSIZING OR IN SEARCH OF RESIDUAL INCOME STREAM** – convert an existing property into an income source without affecting the main house.
- **DIVORCEES:** better than the proverbial doghouse, this could allow families to stay close together, albeit not under the same roof.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF R-HAUZ, PAGE 1; LANESCAPE, PAGE 2

HOW TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

There are many options available to any current homeowner who has property abutting a lane inside the pilot area. One company that was a part of the laneway bylaw development is Tony Cunha and his team at Lanescape.ca. They hold regular public information sessions for designers, builders and homeowners looking to learn more about the intricate process and rules governing these initiatives. They also provide design and construction services, which range in cost due to factors including finished vs. unfinished areas, site-specific servicing, plus consulting fees. Tony emphasizes that this is not the 'Tiny House' movement gripping social media. "These units," he attests, "can be up to 1,700 sq.ft. in size, with a 10mx8m footprint." Lanescape has done a great job at creating illustrations of how to fit a laneway house onto a lot, and the zoning restrictions that govern it. Setbacks from the lane, the main dwelling, as well as height and angular plane restrictions ensures this is a true secondary suite, and not just another house behind a house. While every lot is unique, if you understand the basic rules, there is an as-of-right condition to fit something onto virtually every lane abutting lot. Stickhandling the rules, with guidance from professionals, can shorten the approval process and build the laneway home faster.

BYLAW-FRIENDLY DESIGN

Another group focused on designing solutions that fit the bylaws, is Leith Moore and his team at R-Hauz. They are taking the approach of full bylaw conformity, and have designed a number of products that fit the as-of-right-bylaw, based upon the typical Toronto lot sizes aiming at range from 15 to 30 ft. with stops at 20 and 25 ft. Their goal is to reduce the time required to erect the dwelling through a level of pre-fabrication and repetition of product and process. With roots in larger tract-style development, they are focused on the speed and scalability of the build, for the benefit of the customer and their neighbours, who also share daily access in and out of the shared lanes. With a more contemporary square, yet curvilinear design and standardized options for systems and finishes, these houses have been designed with a "best square foot, rather than most square foot" mantra to maximize storage and comfort and flow for the occupants. With a design already hatched, zoning approvals as-of-right and a repeatable product with modularized components, these may be the most prevalent solutions we start to see around our lanes.

URBAN REVIVAL

We at Eurodale Design + Build, coupled with a handful of architecture offices and custom builders throughout the city, have also dipped our toes in the collective waters, but on a per lot, per client, custom type solution. Many of these projects become lumped in with improvements to the original, aged dwelling that exists on the lot to begin with, as part of a more holistic gentrification of the site. Given the services for the new laneway must be tied to the original home, work will be required at the basement level for connecting electricity, water, sewer and gas anyway. Damages done will want to be repaired, and there is an economy of scale to do improvements to the principal dwelling when crews are on-site for the laneway project. These will create a whole host of unique designs and construction projects of varying style and quality levels, spearheading a tapestry of urban revival of sorts, while solving some housing challenges Torontonians are collectively feeling as we mature and grow.

Do you have any ideas as to how a laneway house could benefit your own life? Give one of the aforementioned professionals a call to see how this exciting initiative could become a benefit to you and your family. As always, I recommend you start your search at RenoMark.ca to find a professional builder to help undertake your project for you. ♦



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