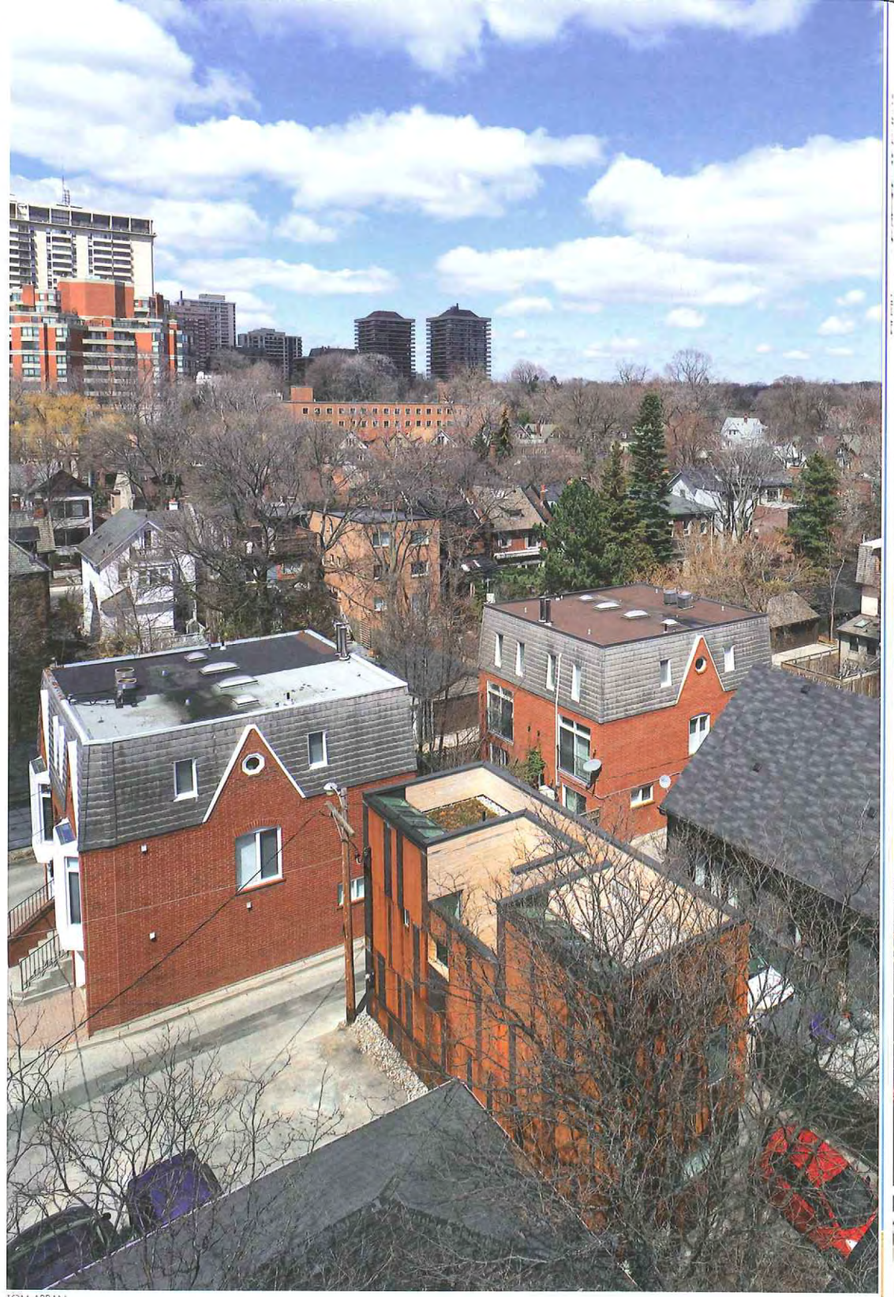
LIFE IN THE BACK LANE



TOM ARBAN



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A LANEWAY SHED IS TRANSFORMED INTO A SUBLIMELY COMPACT PIED-À-TERRE THAT RETAINS TRACES OF ITS PAST LIVES.

PROJECT 40R_LANEWAY HOUSE, TORONTO, ONTARIO
ARCHITECT SUPERKÜL INC | ARCHITECT
TEXT GABRIEL FAIN

The story of laneway housing in Toronto is not a new one. It's a story that's as old as the city itself and emerges from the patterns of uneven urban growth beginning in the 19th century. Toronto's laneway system has always been a valuable resource—first serving as an important lifeline for the distribution of services and goods and accommodating a variety of uses including stables, workers' housing and commercial functions. The advent of zoning regulations and modern transportation systems dramatically impacted the fabric of the laneway network. Today, however, the vibrant character and original uses of many of the laneways is very much kept alive because they have operated as experimental sites for architectural interventions. The project at 40R Shaftesbury Avenue—designed by Meg Graham and Andre D'Elia with the assistance of Drew Sinclair of Superkül Architects—is an exceptional example of one such experiment in adaptive reuse, urban sustainability and infill development.

Located in the historic Summerhill neighbourhood in Toronto, the building at 40R originally functioned as a blacksmith's shop and serviced the North Toronto Railway Station in the early 1880s. For over 120 years, its uses continued to evolve—beginning as a smithy, then a horse shed, a storage depot and most recently, a sculptor's live-work studio. The rich history of the building was most expressively registered on the exterior through the assemblage and overlapping of materials in various states of decay—rusted steel panelling, Insulbrick and barn board.

It takes the vision of two progressive clients—artist Elena Soni and her husband Jorge, a psychiatrist—to see the potential for a dilapidated laneway shed to have a new lease on life. In 2006 they purchased the property with the intention of downsizing and converting the building into their new home. Having admired the shed for over 20 years, the clients were particularly interested in preserving its unique material qualities yet reconfiguring the building to accommodate their desire for daylight, outdoor space and living space.

But projects on the emerging frontier of urban laneways such as 40R are rather difficult to undertake and require a lengthy approvals process through the city and neighbourhood interests. In Toronto, laneway housing is generally excluded from provisions made in the Official Plan and its supportive zoning bylaw measures. In

OPPOSITE ARCHITECT-FRIENDLY RUSTED STEEL PANELS PROVIDE A SOFTLY TEXTURED, DYNAMICALLY PATTERNED FAÇADE THAT ENLIVENS THIS MIDTOWN LANEWAY. **ABOVE** AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE HOME REVEALS THE SKYLIGHTS AND ROOFTOP TERRACE THAT MAKE THIS 850-SQUARE-FOOT STRUCTURE FEEL MUCH BIGGER THAN ITS ACTUAL SIZE.



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TOP A BEAUTIFULLY WEATHERED STEEL DOOR FROM THE ORIGINAL BUILDING WAS REUSED AS A GRITTILY URBAN SLIDING WALL THAT OPENS UP THE DINING ROOM TO THE LANEWAY. **ABOVE** THE PRIVATE ROOFTOP TERRACE. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT** THE FRONT AND SIDE FAÇADES OF THE HOME; NATURAL LIGHT DESCENDS INTO THE GROUND-FLOOR LIVING ROOM; A VIEW FROM THE STAIRS REVEALS THE TIGHT DIMENSIONS OF THE INTERIORS; THE DOUBLE-HEIGHT LIGHT SHAFT IN THE KITCHEN ADDS SECTIONAL DYNAMISM TO THIS COMPACT HOME; THE ROOFTOP TERRACE IN THE EVENING; THIS CORNER DETAIL ILLUSTRATES THAT SALVAGED MATERIAL FROM THE ORIGINAL BUILDING WAS REUSED WHEREVER POSSIBLE; A DETAIL OF THE SLIDING STEEL DOOR; WOOD SIDING IS USED ON TWO FAÇADES.

fact, the original building at 40R was legally nonconforming, which means that zoning for the site doesn't even allow for its current use but was permitted because it was built before the enactment of the current bylaw.

The design is as much about the architects strategically playing with city rules as it is about the intelligent crafting of space and light. The project was both legally and technically made complicated by the building code due to the original structure being built to its property lines on three sides and with only two feet to spare on the fourth. The footprint of 40R measures about 10 feet by 40 feet and sits on an extremely tight lot.

As a result, the architects were prohibited from creating any new openings with the exception of its north façade. The building's second-floor cantilever is a result of a right-of-way at grade that provides access to the rear garage of an adjacent property. So with no available outdoor space at grade and with city restrictions on extending the building envelope, the only solution for additional space was to build upwards and on the roof. Even more complications existed in renovating the old laneway structure due to issues of site servicing and the uncertainty of whether or not the building even had foundations and a proper floor structure.

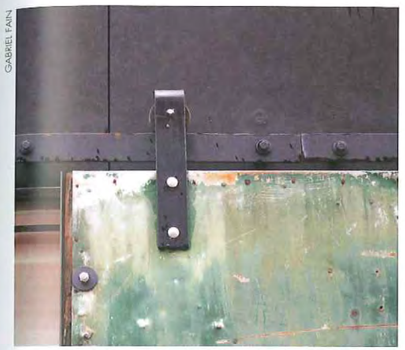
These zero-tolerance conditions, as the architects have termed it, dictated many of the formal gestures. Perhaps the legacy of this building is the manner in which Graham and D'Elia were able to seamlessly integrate issues of sustainability into the architecture. The strategy, therefore, relies heavily on drawing light, air and views from above. A series of three-foot-wide light wells are carved out of the interior and allow a soft and diffuse light from the sky to penetrate the interior spaces. These shafts also function as ventilation stacks in a passive cooling system, in which the operable venting skylights at the top of the light shafts release excess warm air. In-floor radiant heating embedded in the polished concrete floors also reduces the heating energy requirements of the house. A series of rooftop elements including a terrace and green roof are developed into a stormwater collection system used for irrigation and flushing toilets.

To make a home in a laneway with only 850 square feet of space means taking a position about minimal footprint and ecologically considered urban living. The ground floor is designed as tight as a ship and is taken up by a living room and kitchen. A simple material palette of drywall, oak panels, and cedar stairs is used. The second floor has equally well proportioned spaces consisting of a master bedroom and a guest room—each with their own compact bathroom. Small windows are strategically punched out of the walls in these spaces where light is required. A tranquil cedar-lined exterior courtyard is carved out of the second-floor volume and connects to the rooftop with galvanized metal stairs.

The skillful play and composition of materials apparent on the interior is perhaps even more refined on the exterior—becoming, perhaps, an urban spectacle. The external expression speaks about the poetics of how materials can come together almost bluntly—sharing in the rustic vernacular of the laneway. The original thin-gauge rusted-steel cladding, for example, was removed, catalogued, rehabilitated, and reapplied as a veneer in a quilted and irregular pattern on the south and west elevations.



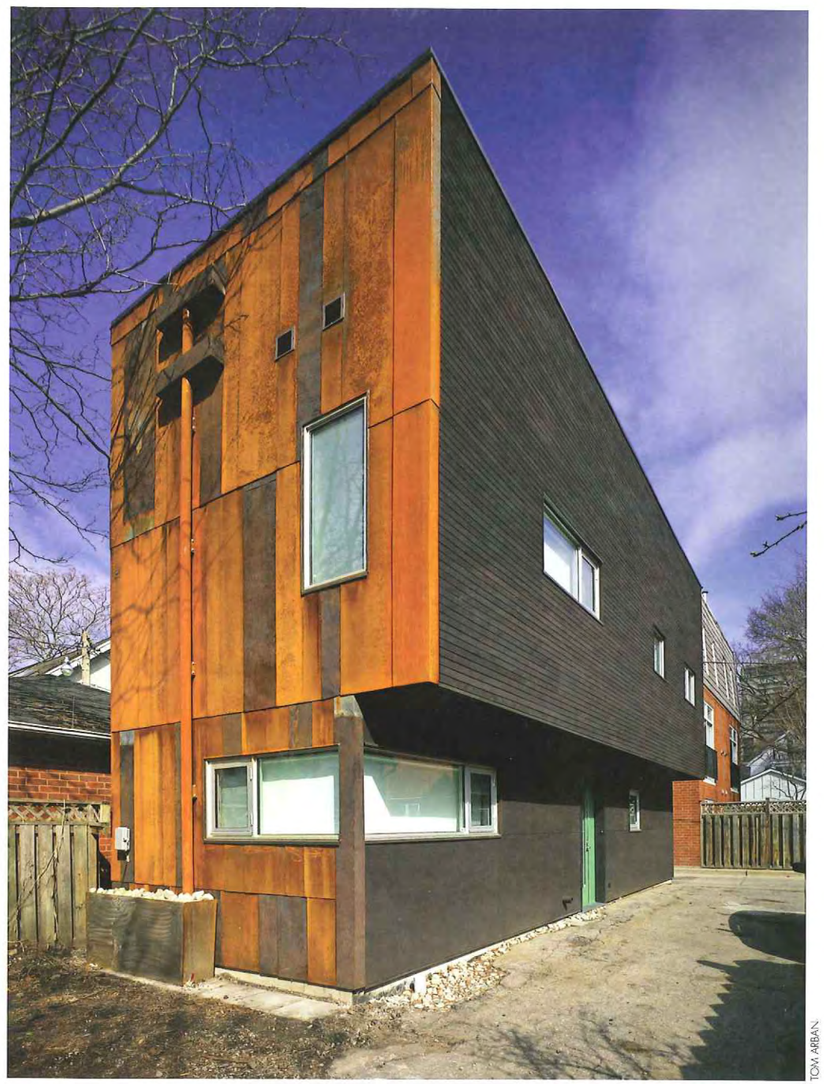
SHAI GIL



GABRIEL FAIN



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LORNE BRIDGMAN



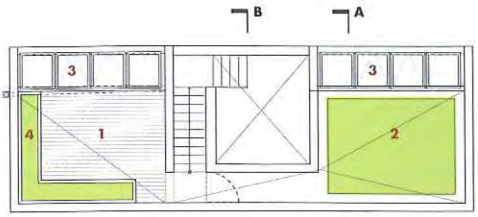
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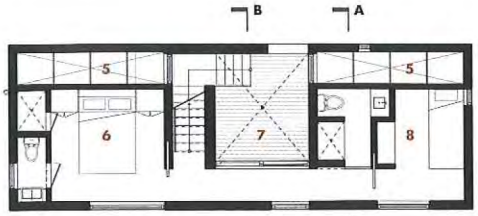
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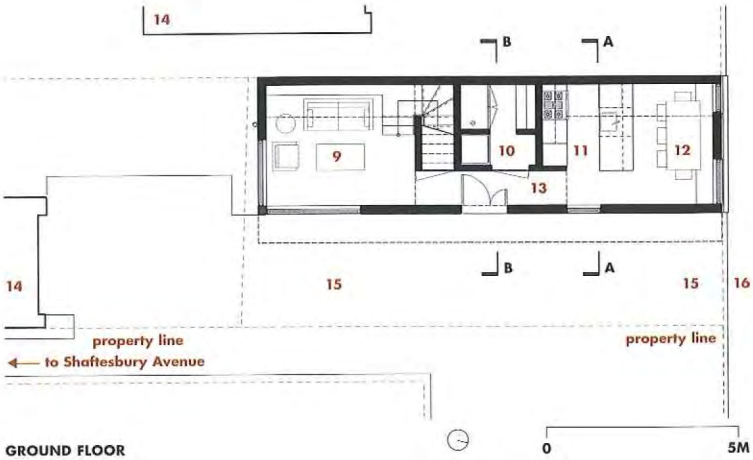
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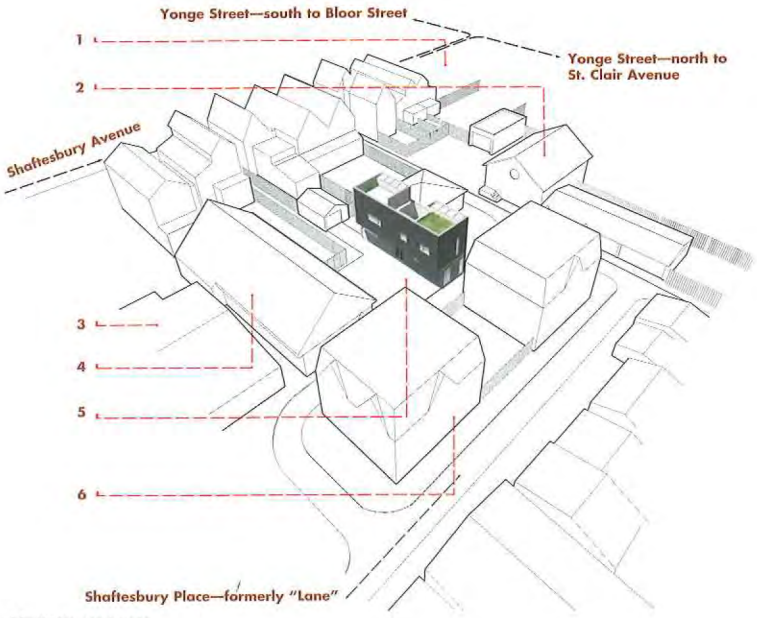
ROOF



SECOND FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR



CONTEXT DIAGRAM

1 ***TTC—SUMMERHILL STATION***
1954 | PASSENGER PLATFORMS

2 ***4 SHAFTESBURY PLACE***
CIRCA 1924-1982 | SITE OFFICE
1982-2007 | SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENCE

3 ***46R SHAFTESBURY AVENUE***
CIRCA 1950-2007 | STONECUTTER

4 ***42A SHAFTESBURY AVENUE***
CIRCA 1960-1992 | AUTOBODY SHOP
1992-2007 | SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENCE

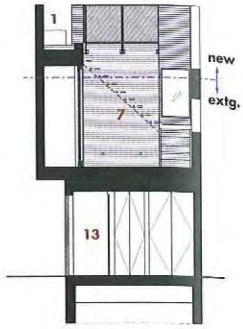
5 ***40R SHAFTESBURY AVENUE***
CIRCA 1880-1910 | BLACKSMITH
CIRCA 1910-1935 | HORSE SHED
CIRCA 1935-1965 | HOTEL STORAGE
CIRCA 1965-1970 | TAXI DEPOT
CIRCA 1970-2007 | ARTIST'S STUDIO
2007+ | SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENCE

6 ***5-11 SHAFTESBURY PLACE***
CIRCA 1930+ | FACTORY
CIRCA 1960+ | WAREHOUSE (DEMOLISHED)
1998-2007 | SINGLE-FAMILY RESIDENCES

1 TERRACE
2 GREEN ROOF
3 SKYLIGHT VENTS
4 PLANTER
5 LIGHT SHAFT
6 MASTER BEDROOM
7 COURTYARD
8 GUEST BEDROOM
9 LIVING
10 MECHANICAL
11 KITCHEN
12 DINING
13 HALLWAY
14 NEIGHBOURING GARAGE
15 RIGHT-OF-WAY
16 SHAFTESBURY PLACE



E-W SECTION A



E-W SECTION B

The building is highly contextual as further zoning requirements for non-combustible cladding resulted in varying materials applied to the exterior. A cedar-strip rainscreen on the second floor of the north and east façades is finished with dark Falun paint from Sweden which makes visible the subtle expressions of the natural wood grain. Marine-grade plywood sheathing is used on the ground floor and is also painted black. Superkül's collagist approach to detailing can be linked to a lineage of the so-called Toronto Style, which is arguably inspired by the work of the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa. The most obvious manifestation of this is the decorative reintegration of the original graffiti-covered steel door onto a sliding track so that it can be used as a screen on the ground floor facing the laneway.

40R makes a convincing argument about reusing, renovating and recycling old buildings in the city's forgotten laneways and how to reactivate them as exciting places of urban life. It's been more than 30 years since Barton Myers wrote his theory on urban consolidation in *Vacant Lottery*, where he was one of the first to state that by using what we have in better ways, we can navigate through complex bylaws and fill in the voids of the city. It has taken this long for firms like Superkül to emerge, firms that can build on these urban theories and who have developed models of sustainable design with a maturity, precision and rigour that is rare among young practitioners. **CA**

Gabriel Fain is currently pursuing a Master of Architecture degree at the University of Toronto. He is an intern architect at Kuwabara Payne McKenna Blumberg Architects.

CLIENT ELENA AND JORGE SONI
ARCHITECT TEAM ANDRE D'ELIA, MEG GRAHAM, DREW SINCLAIR
STRUCTURAL ROBERT E. BROWN ASSOCIATES
MECHANICAL GPY & ASSOCIATES ENGINEERING INC.
INTERIORS SUPERKÜL INC | ARCHITECT
CONTRACTOR BOSZKO & VERITY INC.
GEOTECHNICAL FORWARD ENGINEERING AND ASSOCIATES INC.
AREA 850 FT²
BUDGET WITHHELD
COMPLETION OCTOBER 2008