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# designlines

your guide to design in Toronto

2021 DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

# Batay-Csorba





# Not long ago, laneway houses were **non-starters**, but recent shifts have made them **viable**. This is a tale of architects **working wonders** in back alleys, from the '90s to now

BY MATTHEW HAGUE

## IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ONE

In the early '90s, when architects Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe set out to design a laneway house, there was little legal precedent. A few years earlier, Daniels Faculty architecture professor Jeffrey Stinson had built a house on a back alley in Kensington Market. Shim and Sutcliffe admired how secluded it felt, despite being in the city's centre. The couple wanted something similarly cottage-like in Leslieville, shaded by treed backyards and removed from Main Street bustle. The local planner, city councillor and neighbours all objected – who would want to live in an alley, they asked. Almost 30 years later, as Shim sits facing her private, ivy-covered courtyard, she can laugh it off.



"The neighbours now love that the laneway was activated," she says. "In fact, for the past 14 years, there has been a 'laneway party' with neighbours who live on both streets that share the common laneway." As for City Hall, the couple fought it all the way to the Ontario Municipal Board, the provincial body mediating planning disputes. "The OMB tends to be conservative," says Shim. "But their conclusion, in letting us build, was that laneway housing is an untapped resource. They said it needs further exploration."

## ONE GOOD IDEA BEGETS ANOTHER

To advance the cause, Shim went on to teach a course at U of T and co-edit a definitive book on the subject, *Site Unseen*. Among those





interested in the topic were Studio Junction's Peter Tan and Christine Ho Ping Kong. Although Toronto was no more permissive about laneway housing by the time their own project – Courtyard House – was finished in 2007, they didn't face the same pushback. See, the mood at City Hall was changing. In 2006, city councillor Adam Giambrone tried resolving some of the technical limitations that prevented additional laneway housing – garbage collection, sewage, water. And Studio Junction wasn't building from the ground up, like Shim-Sutcliffe. Instead, they were modifying an existing industrial structure. "When we bought our property, it was already zoned non-conforming residential, with a wide enough lane for fire, snow and garbage access," says Tan. "We still had to go to the Committee of Adjustment, but not all the way to the OMB."

#### A MOVEMENT GAINS MOMENTUM

Unfortunately, despite Giambrone's efforts, city council voted in 2006 against allowing more laneway housing. Too many feared it would turn the lanes into thoroughfares and crowd backyards – a NIMBY's worst nightmare. The defeat didn't kill the dream, though; enter architect Craig Race. In 2013, during a chance meeting with councillor Mary-Margaret McMahon, Race asked why the city was so hesitant to build in back alleys. McMahon,

whose brother was living in Vancouver at the time, wondered the same thing. "Vancouver was allowing laneway houses," she says, "and I thought they made sense here, too, considering the rising cost of housing." The process took nearly five years, including public meetings and consultations hosted by nonprofit Evergreen, McMahon, Race and Ana Bailão, now the deputy mayor. "We had a meeting in Ward 9," says Bailão. "The interest was overwhelming, with grandparents looking for housing near their kids, and people wanting new rental options."

#### ALL THINGS CHANGE

In 2018, the city passed new zoning rules to allow some form of laneway housing as of right – meaning, no Committee of Adjustment or OMB hearings required. "That saved homeowners upwards of \$100,000 in rezoning fees," says Race. Which is good, considering laneway housing can have higher-than-average square-metre costs, a reality when building on tight sites. Still, the zoning isn't entirely permissive. "It allows backyard laneway suites," says Shim, "not stand-alone houses, like mine, with their own address."



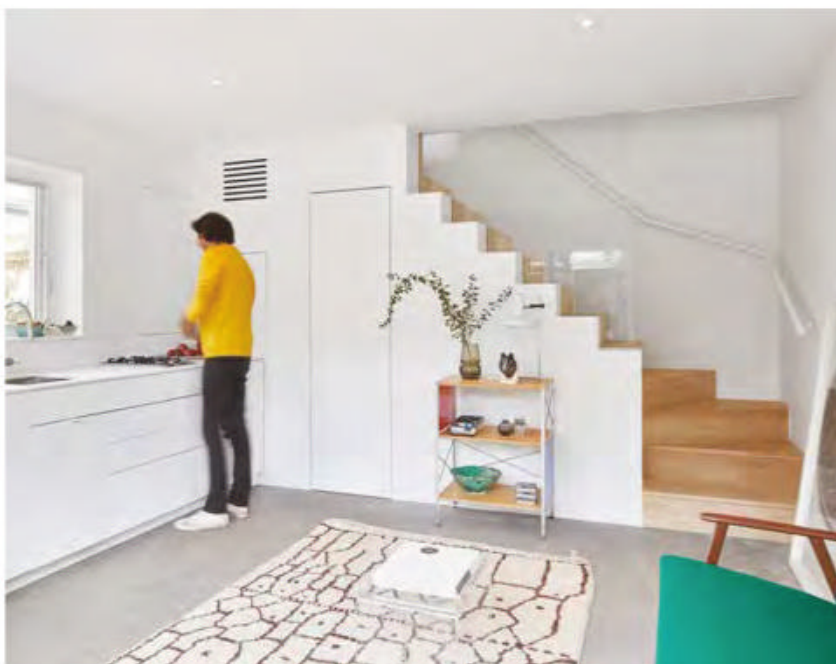
The suites have to be on the same property as another house." There are also many other regulations that limit where and how the suites can be designed and constructed – too prescriptive, according to architect John Shnier, co-founder of Kohn Shnier. In the late aughts, he designed a home on a lane, an upside-down place with the bedrooms on the lower levels and the living up top. "At one point, the city used it as the cover image for the proposed zoning," says Shnier. "But in no way does it reflect the new bylaws – it's too tall, for one, and has its own address. But maybe that's a good thing. Maybe its nuanced creativity wouldn't stand out so much if it followed the rules." That said, many architects have embraced the new laneway suites zoning, creating inspired, innovative back-alley pads. Let's tour four of the best. >



**TOP** Next to the kitchen (by Arc Form Custom Millwork) is the bathroom, tucked discreetly under the white oak staircase.

**BOTTOM** Collar ties shore up the ceiling in the converted hayloft. Radiant-heated white oak flooring from Stone Tile.

**RIGHT** The coach house has its original wooden board and batten siding, which was replaced where damaged. Windows from Loewen.



# Tiny Dancer

When creative director Stéphane Monnet crowded himself out of his Argyle Street house – renting out the top floor to a tenant, turning the ground floor into an office – he was not the victim of his own bad planning. Living part-time in Rotterdam, he no longer needed all the space. What he wanted instead was a pied-à-terre while in the city for work. The location was obvious: his century-old coach house out in the back lane. “We had to shore up the structure, insulate the walls,” says his architect, Timothy Mitandis of Creative Union Network. “Otherwise, we tried not to change the envelope. It’s a charming part of the neighbourhood’s fabric.”

The interiors, however, have been completely overhauled, thoughtfully reconfigured to put a lot into a tight footprint – a kitchen, living-dining area and full bathroom on the ground floor and a master bedroom up top, in the former hayloft, all in under 50 square metres. “It doesn’t feel crowded at all,” says Monnet. The big windows help, flooding the space with light (screened by a hedge for privacy). As does the subtle integration of storage, with cubbies punched into the wall by the bed, cupboards integrated into the stair guard, and a pop-out cabinet door hidden in a wall by the kitchen counter.

“I also love the bright white palette,” says Monnet. “As a designer, I don’t often use a neutral backdrop, but in a small space, it helps make other things – a yellow bathroom floor, art on the walls – stand out more.”

CREATIVE-UNION.NET







**TOP** Engineered hardwood flooring runs throughout the multi-functional second storey.  
**BOTTOM** An entirely new construction, the laneway suite is clad in ACM and Longboard panels, as well as Brampton Brick at grade. Loewen windows and bi-folding door.

## Glam Garage

The dichotomy often found in laneway housing – part garage and part living space, all in one tiny footprint – is disconcerting for some. Garages, with their aluminum doors and raw concrete walls, tend to be drafty.

For one of Craig Race's recent clients, a car and motorcycle lover, the architect figured out a way to prevent errant chills. Facing a St. Clair and Bathurst-area laneway, the standard garage door was swapped out for a fully insulated wall, albeit one on a hydraulic lift to hoist the now-heavier assemblage. There is also extra insulation in the ceiling, and the whole assembly was sealed to prevent noxious fumes from floating up to the two bedrooms and living area on the second level.

Beyond the functionality, Race imbued the garage with a surprising sense of elegance. "The homeowner asked for a gallery-like setting for displaying the cars," says Race. "He wanted it to feel like an extension of his living space." From the backyard, double-pane glass panels not only provide views into the garage, but fold away to put the cars on full display. "It will also work well if the homeowner or someone else wants to convert the garage into a living room one day," says Race. "It already has a nice connection to the yard."

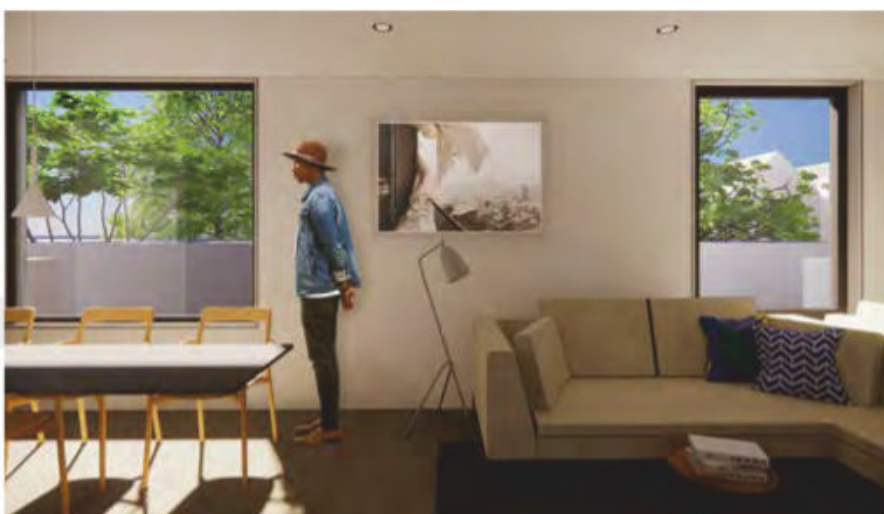
Upstairs, the walls are kept art-gallery white, in part to make the 65-square-metre living space feel more capacious, and to highlight one of the homeowner's prized possessions: an Italian motorcycle, which he displays inside like a statue. CRAIGRACE.COM







# Green Goddess



**TOP** Thanks to prefabricated cement board-clad walls, Superkül's Laneway Suite 1.0 will plug into place, replacing an existing garage.

**CENTRE** As it is with boat design, laneway houses, too, must utilize every square inch, which means combining dining and living spaces.

**BOTTOM** Up top, the bedroom has a private walk-out patio, which extends onto the green roof and overlooks the shared backyard.

While laneway housing tends to cost more, there is an inherent environmental payback. The homes are compact and counterbalance urban sprawl, gently adding density to the city core. When conceiving a prefab laneway concept called Laneway Suite 1.0, architecture studio Superkül decided to push for an even greener design. The goal was to aim for Passive House standards, the certification process for the energy-efficient construction of buildings that consume up to 90 per cent less than comparable structures.

Typically, designing a passive house involves considering site-specific parameters, understanding sun angles, wind directions and shading to mitigate unwanted solar heat gain and improve natural ventilation. Because Superkül's concept – a two-bedroom laneway suite averaging 120 square metres with space for a kitchen, living areas, a car and an outdoor terrace – is meant to suit any number of sites, the studio had to ensure its window placements, overhangs and wall assemblies would work even in the worse-case scenarios, like a treeless parking lot where the sun would beat down and bake the structure.

Superkül also wanted a design that improved affordability. "We have experience with panelized, prefabricated walls from our Oben Flats on Harbord," says Meg Graham, Superkül co-founder, referring to that project's tight construction zone. By building not only the walls but also the washrooms off site (in prefab pods that can be plugged into place like Lego blocks), the studio believes it can reduce the cost from upwards of \$500 per square foot down to \$300. Not cheap, but more within the realm of possibility for many homeowners. [SUPERKUL.CA](http://SUPERKUL.CA)





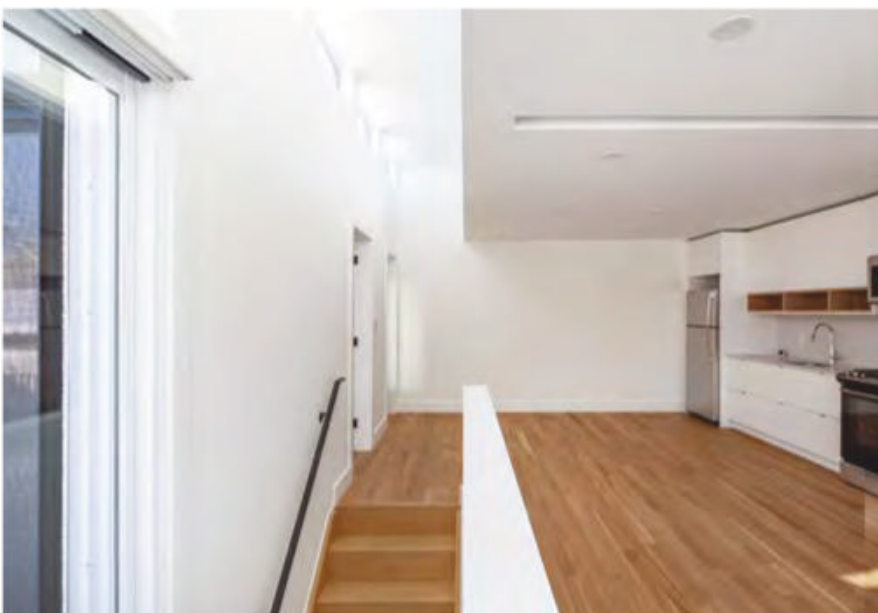


# Punk Rock Granny Flat

The benefits of multi-generational living are manifold. The challenge, though, is comfortably fitting everyone into an urban home. In 2016, architect Vanessa Fong tried to solve the problem for a growing West End family by designing a basement apartment for the grandparents. The homeowners were interested, but changed their mind when they realized that, as their kids grew, they might need the basement for themselves – for a den or a play space. “Moving wasn’t financially feasible,” says Fong, “so we compared a few different scenarios, and the most logical one was a laneway suite in the back, replacing an old garage.”

Although the design started in 2016, predating the 2018 zoning amendment, Fong knew changes were coming and that the homeowners would eventually become one of the first permit-holders under the new rules. The real challenge? “We didn’t want the grandparents to feel on display, so we really had to think about how to bring in light while ensuring privacy in the lane,” says Fong.

As a workaround, Fong tucked the front door at the side and popped what she calls a “mohawk” out of the laneway-facing side of the suite: a rectilinear projection that’s lined with windows on either side, drawing sunshine into the kitchen, living area and bedroom without allowing direct views to the interior. “That’s one of the things I like about laneway housing,” says Fong. “It pushes you to be innovative, to think about what this new form of housing can be.” VF-A.COM



**TOP** Prefinished standing seam metal, corrugated metal and Hardie board panels clad this new build. The building’s “mohawk” aligns with the staircase and is lit by six windows. **LEFT** The living space is a maxed-out 26 square metres, which includes this kitchen built by the project’s contractor, Hugh Burke.