



# Building Better Homes and Communities

[www.actprogram.com](http://www.actprogram.com)

**Affordability and Choice Today**

## ACT Solutions

### Developing Laneway Housing

Terence Van Elslander and Jeffery Stinson, Architects, Toronto, ON

#### Issue

Numerous Canadian municipalities have small remnant, often derelict, back lane properties which could be used for dozens, if not hundreds, of laneway housing sites. This type of development contributes to densification, while making use of an inexpensive, unrealized resource for affordable housing. It also makes effective use of existing infrastructure.

Nevertheless, the difficulties confronting anyone who attempts to build laneway homes in many municipalities, including Toronto, are such that few are built. Such housing can rarely, if ever, comply with existing regulations relating to setbacks, parking, percentage of landscaped area and so on.

#### Plan

Toronto architects Terence Van Elslander and Jeffrey Stinson proposed to make it easier to build laneway housing by streamlining the approvals process. With the assistance of an ACT grant, they would:

- document existing Toronto laneway dwellings as examples;

- document the regulatory framework surrounding laneway developments;
- suggest a new approvals process;
- create three prototypical designs to test the new approvals process and the design parameters of laneway housing;
- design and build an affordable laneway dwelling; and
- document and publish the results with guidelines and findings.

#### Project team

Terence Van Elslander, architect  
Jeffrey Stinson, architect  
City of Toronto planners (Lynda McDonald and Brian Gallagher)  
Martin Liefhebber, architect  
Alan Gordon, P. Eng.  
A.C.E. Contractors Ltd. (David Poldrugovac)

#### Results

##### Development Potential

The use of laneways in Toronto for commerce and housing is as old as Toronto itself. In their 2003



**These Toronto laneway cottages, dating from the 1880s, have pedestrian access only. Built of brick with wood siding, or stucco, each house has a small landscaped area in front.**

Source: Van Elslander & Stinson

report titled *A Study of Laneway Housing in Toronto*, Stinson and Elslander note that laneways were used in the early days to distribute goods and services, accommodate stables and related uses, and provide housing for workers.

Modern day laneway development, they concluded, “could increase the number of dwellings in Toronto by five to 10 per cent”, providing a substantial addition to the municipality’s tax base.

The architects noted that, according to Statistics Canada, the historical, pre-amalgamation city holds some 123,000 owned dwelling units.

*It could work for you!*

Program Partners:



Assuming five per cent of these properties are candidates for laneway development, 6,150 homes could be created. At a modest tax rate of \$1,800 per home, the City would realize an increase in annual revenues of \$11 million without substantial infrastructural changes. As well, the City would receive some \$30.7 million in development charges.

As laneway lots cannot be easily assembled into larger pieces of land, they would be developed by individuals or small developers. Laneway dwellings would provide a way to maximize property value, while providing affordable rental units for low-income singles or small families.

#### **Process Major Impediment**

Stinson and Van Elslander say the major impediment to developing laneway housing in Toronto (and no doubt other municipalities) is a long, complicated and at times quirky approvals process. They say it is unlikely that Toronto will make regulatory changes in the near future to permit laneway housing as a matter of right. The status quo favours case by case approvals, with City planners controlling laneway development on an individual basis and offering opportunities for public comment.

While this process is awkward and inefficient, the authors recognize that laneway housing must be carefully done. Issues of scale, access, privacy and quality come into sharper focus with this housing than with more conventional types. Van Elslander and Stinson say it is important for laneway developers to organize permit applications to address the issues that concern municipal planning, public works and building departments.

Among the many concerns are site density, housing quality, privacy, parking, access for garbage pickup and firefighting, and the fire ratings of walls built right to a property line.

#### **Laneway Dwelling Prototypes**

**Existing garages are kept to provide parking for the main residence on the property. Construction costs, excluding servicing, were estimated to range from \$57,950 for a 2-storey key lot to \$88,410 for a 2-storey island lot (2003).**

**These two designs were among several proposed by Stinson and Van Elslander as solutions for different laneway lot configurations, typical of those found in Toronto.**



Source: Van Elslander & Stinson

The length of time and the expense of the laneway housing approvals process, not to mention the seldom favourable views of neighbours, are onerous and discouraging, say the authors. A cultural shift is required to promote wider acceptance of laneway developments. The authors proposed:

1. The establishment of a Laneway Advocacy Group, composed of laneway homeowners and interested parties. This group would familiarize the public, politicians and City planners with the benefits and unique qualities of laneway living. The group could also provide guidance, expertise and experience for individuals seeking minor variances and act as a clearing house for information and expertise.
2. The creation of a Laneway Housing Initiative by the City, to encourage this form of development and to promote its benefits and the specific approvals required. As an alternative to the current review process, there could be a team approach to laneway development approvals. The City could set up area teams who would develop an expertise and familiarity with laneway developments in their areas. On the teams would be planners, public works officials and zoning officials, plus advocate architects. They could assess proposals at early stages, so that individuals or small developers could predict the time and costs involved, and ultimately assess the viability of their proposals.

*It could work for you!*

The authors also put an onus on laneway housing proponents to undertake early and careful public relations to enhance their likelihood of success. Inform neighbours right at the outset of your project and keep them informed as plans progress, they advise.

### **Lots and Prototype Designs**

In part two of their study, Stinson and Van Elslander present prototype laneway house designs for four types of laneway lots—corner, island, key and slot—typically found in a city like Toronto.

A corner lot is adjacent to two intersecting laneways and has two neighbouring lot lines. The prototype design provides a dwelling area of 54 m<sup>2</sup> and a roof garden of 15 m<sup>2</sup>. A parking space could be used by either the existing house or the laneway dwelling. The roof garden would face the existing backyard, to reduce the apparent height of the laneway unit from the existing house. With laneways on two sides and the dwelling above the garage, large windows can be used to provide daylight for the interior.

Island lots have laneways on three or four sides. Generally, these are existing lots, requiring no severance or land assembly, but they are comparatively rare. They offer many advantages, including size, ease of access, light and so forth. The prototype design allows for a dwelling area of 103.5 m<sup>2</sup>, with a garden space of 49 m<sup>2</sup> and additional space for parking.

Key lots offer the greatest potential for laneway development. They are created by severing an existing lot to provide a service corridor and pedestrian access from the main street along one side of the property. The average width of key lots in the area studied was 7 m, permitting large windows across a

unit's façade. The prototype design provides a dwelling area of 75.6 m<sup>2</sup>, with a roof garden of 24.5 m<sup>2</sup>.

Slot lots often occur behind row housing. They are bound by neighbouring lot lines, with front access from the laneway. As they are hard to service, it is best if they are close to a serviced street, at the end of a laneway. To be viable, a usable rear yard must be maintained for the existing house. Allowing for a rear yard depth of at least 6 m, a dwelling area of 57.5 m<sup>2</sup> can be created, and there is room for a 12.5 m<sup>2</sup> roof garden facing the laneway. A parking space is also included for the existing house.

The designs reflect lessons learned from surveying existing laneway dwellings and taking into account environmental and social issues, urban planning concerns and appropriate construction materials and techniques.

The authors also considered such aspects as construction materials with low-embodied energy, for example stone, concrete block, lumber and cellulose insulation; use of green roofs and green walls to help moderate energy consumption; and hydronic radiant floors for space heating.

"The prototype dwellings created in this study promote affordability and choice", said Mr. Van Elslander. "By its nature, laneway housing is an economical use of the urban land resource base. Laneway lots are less expensive than typical street lots. As well, laneway houses are compact, efficient structures, which reduce costs. Laneway dwellings provide choice for single people, couples, retirees and artists. Laneway housing broadens the scope of available housing."

### **Subsequent Results**

In June 2004, a City committee adopted a resolution favouring further action. A laneway group was to be convened, along the lines advocated by the study, to review all laneway submissions and provide a measure of regulatory consistency across the Greater Toronto Area. However, despite the potential virtues of laneway housing, widespread media coverage of the Van Elslander and Stinson study, and an initial spark of interest at City Hall, this never happened.

Council adopted a new official plan in the summer of 2006 that more strongly enforces existing housing patterns and does not favour anomalies. Planners can allow laneway housing on individual sites if special circumstances warrant it, but concerns about municipal service access and privacy issues have tipped the scales away from laneway development for now.

### **Related reports**

*A Study of Laneway Housing in Toronto; Toronto Laneway Housing* (Jeffrey Stinson, Architect and Terence Van Elslander, Architect, Toronto, 2003)

The reports are available from ACT's website. See "ACT projects & solutions".

### **Contact**

Terence Van Elslander  
Architect  
tvearch@sympatico.ca  
416-533-1142

[www.actprogram.com](http://www.actprogram.com)

#### **ACT Administration**

c/o Federation of Canadian  
Municipalities  
Tel: 613-241-5221 ext. 242  
Fax: 613-244-1515  
E-mail: [info@actprogram.com](mailto:info@actprogram.com)

*ACT is sponsored by CMHC.*

2007

*It could work for you!*