



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Laneway houses are an important sustainable solution for urban neighbourhoods

BY JAKE FRY

Sustainability in new home construction is often referenced with respect to advances in building science, technological fixes and the next newest thing. But the area of sustainability that most interests me involves a more simple approach: that modesty in all things — but especially buildings — results in a much more balanced, simple and successful quality of life.

It was this concept that led me to the idea of providing smaller single-family homes within an urban environment. Having travelled in my youth to cities in Europe and South America, I was impressed by the presence of small, elegant homes that, despite their size, met the needs of individuals and families, and helped to foster strong neighbourhoods. Often set amongst green leafy streets, or surrounding small city squares, these rowhouses and small houses fostered a strong sense of conviviality and community amongst their inhabitants. It was this template that inspired me in 2007 to begin advocating for small infill homes at the rear of existing lots here in B.C.

The aspect of affordability is pertinent here. A common complaint often heard in Vancouver is that young Vancouverites are no longer able to afford to own a house in the same neighbourhood in which they grew up. This is not only true of the Westside, but the Eastside as well, where “starter” houses now routinely run anywhere from \$700,000 and up. At the same time, the aging population is faced with the option of either cashing out on their high-priced equity or moving farther away to a smaller rental unit. Often, neither of these options is desirable.

The irony here is that the economy as a whole appears to be good. But all this affluence does not necessarily translate into a better quality of life for people or sustainable communities. In fact, the opposite has occurred, where the ability of people to maintain their standard of living — especially in terms of quality housing in strong communities — has diminished.



GOOD THINGS: As they say, good things do come in small packages, like this laneway home.

Affluence in this respect has resulted in a type of housing poverty.

Plus, the influx of wealth into these now-expensive neighbourhoods has brought with it a substantial trend of replacing viable housing stock with bigger homes. This comes at a cost to established homes, trees and heritage, which is the common wealth shared by the inhabitants of longstanding communities.

In terms of sustainability, it is worth noting that the waste from renovation, demolition and construction comprises one-third of the total landfill from the Greater Vancouver area, resulting in yet more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Moreover, the new houses that replace older neighbourhood homes are an additional drain on resources, as these larger homes require massive amounts of electricity, heat and water for the now ubiquitous four bathrooms.

Smaller homes built amongst older established homes have a direct benefit on neighbourhoods. An indicator of a strong community is its capacity to accommodate family members of different generations: grandparents, children and grandchildren.

In this respect, the laneway house can provide this environment, with elderly parents living in the laneway house and the younger family retaining the family home (or vice-versa). Each member of this extended family benefits from the mutual support this environment provides.

Small houses are testaments to the fact that we (privileged North Americans) can live happily in much smaller spaces with much less impact on our environment. Smaller well-designed houses are easy to heat, easy to clean and enjoyable to live in. The reduction of the carbon “footprint” is substantial.

I think that, increasingly, people are maturing beyond the perspective that big and “bling” is best. These are often the people who show up at my office looking for something different. They recognize the value of quality: quality of materials and design, and the quality of life for all. These are the people who recognize the wisdom in economist E.F. Schumacher’s words: “Small is beautiful.” *BCHM*

Developments is a guest column about current residential construction and housing topics in British Columbia. Jake Fry is president of Smallworks in Vancouver, which specializes in the design and building of small homes and laneway houses. Email him at jake@smallworks.ca.