



LIVING SMALL

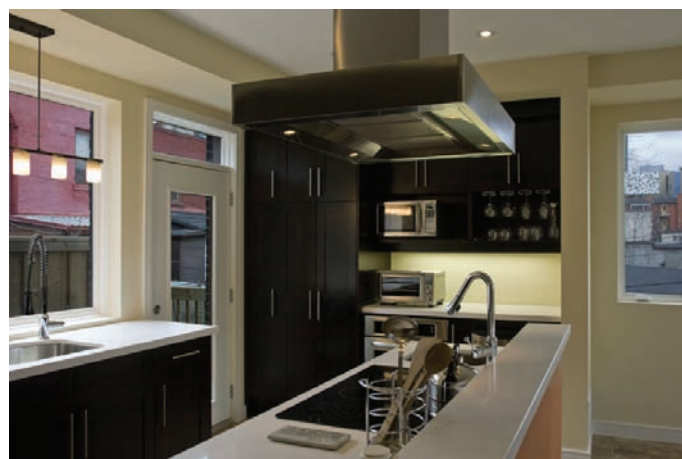
HOW TO MAKE USE OF THE CITY'S HIDDEN STREET-GRID

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Urban sprawl is something we take seriously. And in Toronto, there seems to be few options to circumvent it: if you want a new house, conventional wisdom dictates that you must tear an old city abode down and rebuild at great cost, or find a plot in the suburbs, and develop on some of the region's finest farmland.

At Solares, we are proponents of an alternative: laneway housing. Laneway houses are modeled after the mews houses in European cities like London, where land is scarce and the once ignored stables or garages behind large city dwellings have been converted into much sought-after single-family homes or professional offices.



This kind of development exploits underused land, and increases density in areas where many say only a condo would fit. Laneway housing also makes our cities safer. As the late urban theorist Jane Jacobs would say, these homes give “eyes on the street”, which allow individuals to engage with a little corner of society that may have otherwise been ignored.

We had the opportunity to design and build a house in a laneway in downtown Toronto. The modern, three-storey structure is hidden in a quiet backstreet near the Art Galley of Ontario, occupying space that once housed an out-of-use two-car garage. Now, the brick-and steel-clad “Laneway Loft” is a friendly looking home with windows that open right on to the laneway, allowing the owner to engage with passersby and his view of the city. The project was completed in June 2010 to much acclaim; the neighbours love it and the house was recently featured in Toronto’s Design Lines magazine.

The Laneway Loft uses a fraction of the energy required to run an average Canadian dwelling, and boasts the features we employ in all Solares-designed houses: hot water panels mounted on the south-facing roof supplement hot water needs and an in-floor heating system; siding and roofing is made from locally-sourced and recycled materials; and deep roof overhangs help keep the house cool in the summer months.

Little pockets of underdeveloped inner-city land, like the one Laneway Loft inhabits, seem to be the perfect space for sustainable housing. And we believe this type of densification would help curb urban sprawl, and create more efficient, and safer city cores. Vancouver, for one, has already caught on to the idea. The city has been spearheading Canada’s laneway housing movement, having recently established a city-funded laneway project.

Here in Toronto, laneways are the city’s second street-grid. They lace in and around the major arteries we traverse everyday, but remain underused and too often, overlooked when it comes to development. The only barrier to creating laneway housing, so ubiquitous in Europe, is poor municipal support. If municipal policy caught up with demand, laneways could become lovely—and efficient—places to live in Canada’s cities.

