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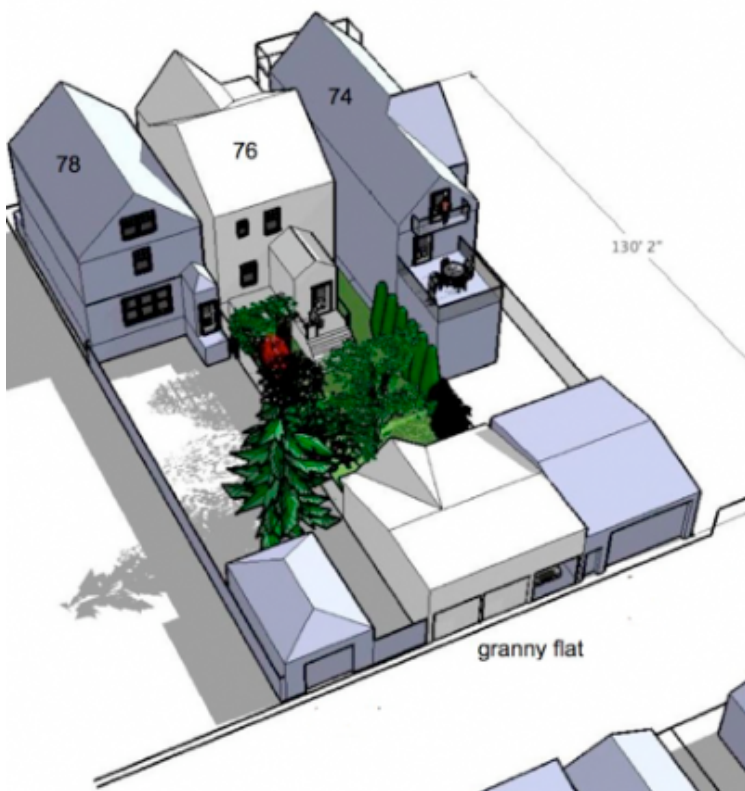
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2007 11 18

City Planners Split Families



By Rohan Walters B.Arch., B.E.S.
Principal Designer of Spaces By Rohan Inc.

Here is a real story of a real grandmother, mother, grandchildren and a wonderful neighbourhood. It's a granny flat story.

A recent project of mine involves an aging mother and her caring daughter. The daughter has a family home with her husband and two children in downtown Toronto. Their lot can accommodate a three-car garage with lane access as-of-right. The daughter would like to have her mother live with the family on the same lot in a wheelchair friendly granny flat. The mother has a degenerative mobility condition that is worsening.

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The cost of a 540 square foot granny flat that is wheelchair friendly and also accommodates one car parking, is approximately \$50,000 - \$70,000. In contrast, adapting the existing house to be wheelchair accessible is very expensive. The equipment cost alone -- the exterior elevator from sidewalk to 1st floor and interior wheelchair lift on the interior stair -- NOT including design, structural or labour, will be \$40,000 to \$50,000. The complete renovation will cost \$150,000, \$250,000 plus. I know this because I'm doing another house for another aging couple that is doing exactly this. Compare this to the yearly cost for a nursing home which is approximately \$40,000 to \$90,000, and will likely not be nearby. The cost savings and convenience of having a granny flat is self-evident.

My point is this. The owners received approval from public works, ambulance, fire department and the building department for this granny flat on a lane. Planning was the only agency in our city not to approve the granny flat.



Municipal Planning policy seemingly contradicts the Ministry of Housing policy alluded to in the new Ontario Building Code: "Ontario is moving forward with a new Building Code. The 2006 Building Code will:

1. Facilitate the building of small care homes
2. Make constructing small residential buildings easier
3. Contain a new format that allows more creativity in building design while maintaining public safety

The new Building Code also encourages the construction of small care homes by increasing flexibility in the design of such facilities. These changes will make it easier and more cost-effective to build a new small care home or to create one by converting an existing building, and they will help seniors, other Ontarians requiring attendant care, and people who have a developmental disability living in small group settings to remain near their families.

http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/userfiles/HTML/nts_1_27485_1.html
"One of the important lines here is "... and people who have a developmental disability living in small group settings to remain in their neighbourhood and close to their families."

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In order to contest the present city positions the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) the only avenue. The OMB is expensive. Therefore, only the privileged few can attempt to legally overturn city planning policy at this time. Furthermore, such litigation is on a site-by-site basis. In other words, even if there is a victory for a granny flat or other alternative site architecture, the decision does not set precedent for other sites. This is not an acceptable option for the average citizen.

So, when the Committee of Adjustment turns down a granny flat or other rear yard alternatives, how is that refusal worded?

The usual city-planning refrain for refusal is the granny flat concept is not acceptable according to the Official Plan, that city planning thinks the granny flat (a.k.a. house behind a house) is not in keeping with the present development of the area.

In reality this neighbourhood has children using the lane as a real playground. There is an unofficial studio lane flat - read illegal - down further on the lane. There are all sorts of non-garage functions happening within and attached to many of the nearby garages, etc.

In this proposal the granny flat is NOT severed from the main lot. Water and sewer through the main house will service the flat. The flat's garbage pick up will be part of the existing house's street pickup program. The flat will be sprinklered. The flat is accessible from the street for fire and ambulance through existing side yard access.

So, one could infer that planning would prefer a converted dwelling unit with many multiple units beside a single-family home. The reality is in order to make "small care (nursing) home" financially viable the building must have many units. That is what exists now. Hence the annual assisted care cost of \$40,000 to \$90,000 per year per resident depending on the size of the nursing home and the level of care the resident requires.

The "Official Plan" is supposed to have neighbourhood secondary plans as a clarifying instrument. Planning has no secondary plan for this neighborhood. This secondary plan is supposed to address specific community trends and policy. In fact planning has no secondary plans for the vast majority of neighbourhoods in this city. This is fundamentally wrong and must not continue. Part of the result of planning negligence--not having secondary plans, is an ever increasing level of dissatisfaction and an increase in planning litigation from developers and citizens. City planning is probably spending more time and money in litigation rather than actual planning. And those who can afford to litigate or who are pissed off enough are doing so.

Most of us are or will have to care for someone whose abilities and mobility are in decline. If by having alternative site architecture and planning we can make our collective lives happier, healthier and financially easier, then we must alter our city planning policy. Granny flats and lane housing are a beginning.

Designers, architects, other agencies have solutions available if city planning would only give alternate solutions a chance. By not allowing granny flats and other living units within the existing

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fabric of our communities, the depth and care in our communities is fundamentally undermined by a planning policy that does not recognize the impending financial nightmare and social instability it's policies may be contributing to.

[email this story] Posted by **Rohan Walters** on 11/18 at 10:24 AM

1. I totally support your arguments. When the family home is naturally passed to the next generation, remaining in a suitable flat in the same location can economically solve many problems for the entire family, without disrupting the life of elderly people who may have lived for many years in the neighborhood. Etc.

Posted by **Hella Schwarzkopf** on 11/18 at 03:16 PM

2. It is a mystery to me why laneway housing and other alternative solutions are not more rapidly accepted and adopted by city planning. As well why communities are not demanding it.

Posted by **B Starr** on 11/19 at 02:08 PM

3. With hope this innovative project will set a precedent that will pave the way for more...such convenient arrangements not only strengthen families, create diverse and dynamic neighborhoods but could be the next generation of mixed income, social and intrinsically affordable housing. Cool.

Posted by **Chalo Barraeta** on 11/19 at 02:59 PM

4. this is a clear example outlining what changes must take place to provide flexible and adaptive growth for cities, while respecting people and their ability to live in their neighborhoods for a long time

Posted by **paola poletto** on 11/19 at 04:31 PM

5. The granny flat is an eloquent way for parent(s) to live out their years. Having your parents living steps away, mind you separated by a small patch of grass, and not so far that a car ride is a necessity.

When the time comes for my parents to make that move, I would do it too.

And it sure beats parking that Winnebago out in the driveway.

Posted by **Craig Nicoletti** on 11/19 at 06:58 PM

6. Very well presented Rohan, This is just another case of the City's left hand not knowing what the right is doing. I am sure that the planning dept is worried about the abuse of type of housing, but there is no reason that this cannot be handled in C of A. we should also consider the advantage of lane access suites that would bring pedestrian traffic to these lanes, making them safer.

Posted by **Scott Simmons** on 11/19 at 11:49 PM

7. Web citation leads nowhere. Can you fix please?

Posted by **David E Toronto** on 11/20 at 08:57 AM

- 8.

9. Hi David, MMAH has changed the link and made a few additions from 1-1/2 years ago. Here is the new one.
<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page682.aspx?DateTime=632871792000000000&PageMode=View> Ontario is moving forward with a new Building Code. The 2006 Building Code will:
- Set out new energy-efficiency requirements (see separate Backgrounder on energy efficiency changes)
 - Establish new construction standards that will make buildings more accessible to people with disabilities
 - Facilitate the building of small care homes
 - Make constructing small residential buildings easier
 - Contain a new format that allows more creativity in building design while maintaining public safety
 - Boost Ontario's building industry by encouraging innovation in building design and products.
- The 2006 Building Code sets new standards for accessibility for people with disabilities, supporting Ontario's goal to be a leader in accessibility. Under a process set out in the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA), the province will continue to work to achieve even higher accessibility standards to be implemented in phases through 2025. The changes to the Building Code are a step towards fulfilling the government's AODA commitments to improve accessibility for everyone. The new Building Code also encourages the construction of small care homes by increasing flexibility in the design of such facilities. These changes will make it easier and more cost-effective to build a new small care home or to create one by converting an existing building, and they will help seniors, other Ontarians requiring attendant care and people who have a developmental disability living in small group settings to remain in their neighbourhoods and close to their families. The Building Code is also being changed to make it easier to design and construct houses and other small buildings by including new requirements that are easy to understand and apply.

Posted by **Rohan Walters** on {comment_date format='%m/%d'} at {comment_date format='%h:%i %A'}

Posted by **Rohan Walters** on 11/20 at 11:57 AM

10. "Isolation and loneliness are the malnutrition of the elderly" Brother William Geenen. In this age when the goal of most thinking organizations is to prevent or delay nursing home placement by supporting the elderly to age in place, it is sad to see bureaucratic Agencies exercising their power to say "no", by denying a caring daughter the opportunity to care for her mother in the home.

Posted by **C. Henry** on 11/22 at 02:52 PM

- 11.

12. Rohan: Interesting and well-written as usual... thx for sending food for thought. I understand city planners are overworked and understaffed in To.; at the very least, until that major problem is resolved, it's imperative for them to support local efforts to improve our neighbourhoods and yes, keep families together. We need to take more from other model cities and adapt it for To.... Otherwise, I fear developers will turn this place into an urban wasteland. My GF is from Berlin and she is very turned off by the lack of city planning here!

Posted by D.B. on {comment_date format='%m/%d'} at {comment_date format='%h:%i %A'}

Posted by D.B. on 11/22 at 02:57 PM

13. one argument that seems to underlie the city's opposition to this sort of thing is that it is "too hard to control" laneway development. This is so lame! Many of us can establish tenanted units in our homes - or even operate them as rooming houses - as of right, and remain responsible for maintaining law and order etc. A tenanted unit in the backyard is no different in terms of that responsibility.

Posted by A. Hall on 11/23 at 12:02 AM

14. I think when an idea is just too good, too easy and can support not only seniors but those families with young children who would benefit from having grandpa and grandma around is just too far out the box for certain bureaucrats to comprehend. They can give you all the codes and excuses why you can't build but we can give them many more benefits and reasons why it would and could work.

Posted by C. Samuels on 11/23 at 03:50 PM

15. Thank you for furthering the dialogue on this subject. You present a very clear case study explaining several benefits that laneway housing can provide for the city. Please don't give up, eventually we'll make it happen.

Posted by Tyler R. on 11/23 at 06:26 PM

16. I wonder if the granny flat has a basement or is it built on a cement pad like a garage. Would this make a difference in acceptance of the structure?

Posted by Barb Jenkins on 11/27 at 09:04 AM

17. In modesty there is beauty if it is orchestrated with imagination.

For a granny flat to be truly affordable, essential, efficient and fully 'barrier free' the introduction of a basement or a second level is not a good idea for an urban solution at this time.

However a 2nd storey and/or basement may be better idea if it were positioned in outlying suburban or rural

sites.

Essentially; At this point in time, if a granny flat is to be supported and successful, it must be financially rationalized as a real alternative living space for the elderly, the infirmed or helpful to the family context. Therefore, if, like the proposal here, we can fit, with dignity, within a two car garage we are more likely to succeed because we have demonstrated modesty, restraint and necessity.

Posted by Rohan Walters on 11/27 at 03:26 PM

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