



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Alison Hall and her designer Rohan Walters in her garden, in front of laneway garage she'd like to partly convert to "granny flat" to house her mother.

From garage to granny flat, and if preferences later change, back to garage again.

Converting two-thirds of the three-car space behind Alison Hall's home into a "warm and comfortable" 550-square-foot apartment would be quite straightforward, says designer Rohan Walters.

If Hall were to sell the house later, changing the flat back into a garage would be even simpler, he says. Nor would it affect the lot's "imprint" by adding an extra building.

"And there would still be a carport," Walters says.

The flat – living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom – would open into Hall's garden, not the lane.

"On that side, there would be in-fill walls, easily removed and replaced with doors if the building were to become a garage again," Walters says.

No room for 'granny flats'

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Bill Taylor

FEATURE WRITER

Alison Hall did the math.

It would cost about \$150,000 to make her house on Delaware Ave. "barrier free" for her mother, Mary Hall, 77, who has rheumatoid arthritis and finds stairs difficult.

To move her mom into a nursing home would cost between \$40,000 and \$90,000 a year. Not that that's an option right now.

"She wants to keep her independence," says Hall, who works for the provincial environment ministry. "She's sold her house in Brampton and is renting a condo there.

"But sometimes she has trouble caring for herself. If something happens and I need to be with her, Brampton is a significant distance."

Converting two-thirds of the three-car garage on the lane behind Hall's house into a "granny flat" would cost her around \$70,000.

That was her preference. Rohan Walters, her designer, says the living space was approved "by public works, ambulance and fire – who were happy about the access from Delaware Ave. – and the building department.

"Only the planning department said no. It makes no sense, but it's a matter of adhering to their official plan for the city. Laneway housing is not a part of that. They have no secondary plan to respond to specific neighbourhood needs."

Walters believes Hall's situation is symptomatic of a citywide dilemma that can only get worse as the percentage of elderly people increases. He calls the question "huge ... a historic issue. As we age, just watch!"

Hall's councillor, deputy mayor Joe Pantalone, agrees that situations such as Hall's should get special consideration. "Laneway housing should be taken on a case-by-case basis. You need to know the unique context, with the emphasis on `unique.'"

The planning department "tends to take more of a biblical position," says Pantalone. "If it's not in the Bible, it's not allowed. Our community is struggling with these (aging population) issues, but it hasn't yet reached a consensus or even a majority. Who knows? Ten years from now, maybe . . ."

That may be too late, says Walters. Imaginative solutions are needed quickly to allow people to "age in place," close to their adult children.

"The granny-flat option isn't for everyone but it could work for a hell of a lot of people," he says. "Aging in place is part of the provincial mandate. It's only the planning body that is not in line with that."

Queen's Park last year introduced an "aging-at-home strategy ... to better meet the needs of a growing and aging population." The Canadian Mental Health Association has called "aging in place" a critical element of health care. According to Canada's Association for the 50Plus, 44 per cent of Ontario's disabled population is 65 and older. That age bracket will outnumber the 15-year-old and younger group by around 2015.

Gary Wright, chief city planner, says of cases like Hall's that "typically we ask that they undergo a rezoning. This allows all parts of the city to ... look at the merits. There are a number of examples where laneway housing has been built. But it's very site-specific."

He wrote to Hall saying the city plan "contains very strong neighbourhood protection policies ... all new development (must) be in keeping with the existing physical character of the neighbourhood."

Allowing her flat to be built would set a precedent that "could lead to requests for future severance of lots with lane access."

Walters says the flat would be built within the garage "footprint" and face inward, with no access, not even a window, to the lane.

"It would open into the garden. Water and sewer through the house would service it. Garbage pickup would be part of the existing street program. We specifically undertook not to sever the lot."

He'd like a city referendum on the issue, to pressure councillors to introduce housing flexibilities.

"Planning does not allow us as designers or architects to work with them to come up with alternatives," Walters says.

"How do they allow themselves as a body to become disassociated from what's happening on the ground? They're using a bulldozer to level a sandbox when all that is needed is a shovel and a rake.

"There are creative, sensitive and capable planners. They have the ability to designate experimental permits ... But there is also an established guard set on maintaining the status quo."

Hall could appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board but that's a costly process, she says. For the moment, she's resigned to the rejection.

"My mother's happy right now, but that's only temporary," she says. "I may well take this up again."

Walters recalls the uproar 10 years ago over approving basement flats.

"We heard the same sort of arguments," he says. "By 2005, the city bowed to the inevitable."

Toronto Star

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