

Shelley Fralic: The compromises of laneway life (with video)

Making a trade: Vancouver couple gives up space to find freedom

BY SHELLEY FRALIC, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MAY 5, 2014 1:02 PM



The exterior of the laneway home of Patricia Fraser and Cal Koat behind a Vancouver east side bungalow near Broadway and Rupert.

When we last left Patricia Fraser and Cal Koat, the Vancouver couple was living in a roomy Vancouver west-side two-bedroom, two-bath condo and was about to break ground on a new laneway house behind a little bungalow on a leafy street near Broadway and Rupert.

That was a year or so ago. A designer had been consulted, the permits for the 503-square-foot, two-storey laneway home with attached garage were in place, materials had been chosen and their excitement was palpable.

The imperatives for the move were familiar to many facing the Vancouver housing crunch: Fraser and Koat wanted to stay in the city but live in a more affordable place with a smaller footprint. And they wanted to stay close to Fraser's daughter and grandchildren.

The answer, and it is increasingly so in many Metro Vancouver municipalities, was a laneway house. In this case, a laneway house in the backyard of Morgan and Matt Westcott, Fraser's daughter and son-in-law.

Fast forward to today, and the couple has moved into their new digs, embraced the compact life and are busy telling everyone it's the best move they've ever made.

Their laneway is a pretty butter yellow three-level tiered box built on the edge of the sloping lot, seemingly sculpted into the lee of the land, its camouflage aided by a roof that is one part metal cladding and three parts green, planted with environmentally friendly sedum.

Off the ground floor entrance, which is smack dab on the lane, and beyond the welcome mat that says "It's bigger on the inside," is a small bedroom and bathroom and a little nook that has been cleverly turned into a music studio. Up the first flight of stairs is the landing and a door to the shared backyard. A few more stairs up and you're in the main living area, a room that is about 20 feet by 10 feet and houses both the kitchen and living area, with a door to a balcony and expansive southern views.

The entire place is a study in compact living. The kitchen is surprisingly functional, with a fridge and 24-inch gas stove. There is a dishwasher, microwave and built-in appliance "garage," along with sleek wood cabinets, a double sink and a quartz waterfall countertop that has room for two chairs. It's tight, though, so tight the couple had a sofa custom-built for the sitting area. A television is wall-mounted, there are two small footstools and that's about it.

In fact, says Koat, the compactness of the place reminds him of a houseboat, where every inch of space has to earn its keep. And because the square footage is minimal, he says, "You can choose better materials."

The couple credits Laurel James of Novell Design, who managed the project from start to finish, for the clever space-saving designs and airiness of the rooms.

There are windows everywhere, for instance, most without coverings but strategically placed for natural light and privacy. There are drawers built into two of the 13 stairs that connect the levels, one for keys and sunglasses, the other for shoes. There are niches built into walls and, on the main floor, the tiny bedroom has a bed with storage underneath. Bed-side are floating shelves with wall-mounted reading lights above. The bedroom closet is outside in a hallway across from the bathroom, both closed off by a pocket door so Fraser doesn't disturb her sleeping night owl husband when she's up early. The bathroom has no tub but a spa shower, and a stacked washer and dryer are in a closet by the front door.

Every wall is painted in shades of grey or off-white to reflect light. The floors are engineered wide plank wood and, on the main, have radiant heating. It's a smart home, with heating, wiring and all the mechanicals controlled by computer. The vacuum is built in, and the lighting fixtures were chosen for both function and artistic appeal, given there is limited wall space for decoration. They don't mind living on a lane, says Fraser, because "when we lived in our condo, we had a view of the lane and other condos."

And that, they say, is what really surprised them: just how much they love their little laneway.

After they sold and cleaned out their 1,114-square-foot condo — giving away most of their clothes, furniture and household items — they moved into a 900-square-foot rental for six months until the laneway was ready for occupancy last December.

"We thought, how are we going to live in 500 square feet," says Fraser, who is 61. "But we did it and it makes perfect sense."

Adds Koat, 55: "You acquire so much stuff, even in a two-bedroom condo, and it was stuff that we hadn't even seen in 13 years (of marriage)."

They still have a small storage locker, but vow to clean it out, too, embracing a new mantra that Fraser puts this way: "If we don't need it, we don't have it."

The move has, in a word, given them freedom.

"I like the fact that we can't keep any extra stuff," says Fraser. "Until I did it, I had no idea what a liberating experience it would be."

"Instead of living for things, we are going to be living for experiences," says Koat, whose studio nook has 12-foot ceilings and a sliding library ladder to access the custom shelves that hold his 4,000-plus CDs of contemporary global music.

Fraser has chronicled the experience in her *The Lady Who Lives Down The Lane* blog, posting triumphs and tribulations, as well as news and photographs about the process since June 2012. Their laneway was completed on time and on budget, costing about \$300,000, all in.

And while the laneway was being built, the Westcotts took the opportunity to renovate their basement for their growing family. The family revamp also included a new backyard shed and fencing. Because the laneway house technically belongs to Fraser's daughter and son-in-law (it can be rented but not sold), the family has a formal tenants-in-common agreement and have in place future financial and miscellaneous obligations related to the laneway, in which Fraser says she and Koat plan to "age in place."

The couple have also become spirited advocates for the laneway lifestyle, which continues to gain favour throughout Metro Vancouver. In Vancouver alone, more than 1,000 permits for laneway houses have been issued since they became legal in 2009.

"We are so in love with this place," says Koat. "It's incredible. It's like a tailored suit."

sfralic@vancouversun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun