

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

# Homes designed for future should be talked about today

Small houses: It's time we started taking into consideration views and needs of people who may be moving in

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I was recently reading an article about a house in Japan built on a very small lot, only three metres wide and 21 metres long. I started thinking about who I would need to talk to if I wanted to build one of these small houses in Vancouver.

It wasn't long before I realized that none of the people I would need to consult, obtain approvals from or whose advice or rules I would be compelled to follow are the people who might be looking to live in a small house like this.

While this 69.5-square-metre (750-square-foot) two-storey house on what seems like a postage-stamp-sized lot may seem totally out of place in our local leafy single-family neighbourhoods, it is a form of housing largely missing in Metro Vancouver.

There are many people at various stages of their lives, including young families and mobile empty nesters, who want to live in a small detached house on a fee simple lot that offers flexible living arrangements. (Link to the article about the Japanese house: [www.dezeen.com/2014/03/28/ima-i-three-metre-wide-house-katsutoshi-sasaki/](http://www.dezeen.com/2014/03/28/ima-i-three-metre-wide-house-katsutoshi-sasaki/))

Demand for smaller forms of housing or alternative housing design isn't driven just by the desire for more affordable housing, although that is one objective that can be achieved. Some want to live in a different kind of house because they have different lifestyle priorities. The traditional family is no longer traditional. Singles, single-parent families, combined generations — all search for living arrangements and forms of shelter that our housing market has been slow to provide.

Vancouver does, in fact, have a few single-family lots in some neighbourhoods that are as narrow as 4.9 metres (16 feet) wide. But small lots of this size or even smaller, like the Japanese project, are few and far between.

Laneway homes are a recent addition to the housing mix of the small housing genre, but they can't be subdivided to be owned on a detached lot.

Breaking new ground in housing development isn't an easy task.

Designing small houses that meet consumer demand is the easy part. Alternative housing forms, like the Japanese example, can be designed to functionally meet the needs of the people who live in them and to fit sensitively into an existing neighbourhood fabric. The design of the house must reinterpret our conventional notions of scale, how natural light is accessed and how space is used, but that's all possible.



STUART DAVIS/PNG FILES

Laneway homes, like this one in East Vancouver built by Smallworks, are a recent addition to the mix of the city's smaller housing genre, but they won't appeal to everyone because the land can't be subdivided to allow the houses to be owned. Getting officials to green light alternative housing forms is a difficult task.

The hard part is obtaining the approvals. Most of the rules and regulations, and almost all of the processes involved in obtaining land-use approvals and construction technical approvals, have little or no relationship to the current needs, desires, attitudes and ideas of the people who will eventually live in the housing that is being built.

Instead, the rules are about mitigating impacts, assuaging existing residents and avoiding or managing risk.

For example, if I'm thinking about building something that might be "pushing the envelope" or might require a whole new zoning designation in a neighbourhood, it makes sense to start by talking to citizens.

But the city will expect the citizens I will be informing and whose opinions I will be seeking are the people who today live in the neighbourhood in which I want to build the house.

Of course, it makes total sense that I talk to them. But shouldn't I also be seeking views of people who might want to live in that neighbourhood in the future? Aren't the views of the future residents of the alternative housing I'm planning just as valid as the views of people living in traditional housing in the neighbourhood?

Let me put it another way. How do new innovations come about in housing and neighbourhood design if the only people influencing decision-making about future housing forms and

neighbourhood design are the people living in current housing forms in the neighbourhoods that can be reshaped to provide housing diversity?

Decisions are made about building design, including building codes and other regulations, without public hearings and wide public discussion about how we want to live.

Is it appropriate, for example, for bedrooms to be designed without windows, instead using "borrowed light" with devices such as sliding glass partitions for internally located bedrooms? Vancouver has changed its rules on this issue a couple of times over the past decade or two. I haven't seen any detailed post-occupancy surveys of people who have lived in

apartments that had internal bedrooms. I've heard all kinds of opinions from planners, architects and even politicians.

Isn't it important to know if people like or dislike this type of bedroom design?

Shouldn't we be asking people how they live in their homes and how they want to live in them in the future before we start making rules about what kind of homes we can build and how they should be designed?

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