

# MY LANEWAY HOUSE

The ins and outs of building your own house-behind-a-house.

BY JANE MUNDY

I bought my Vancouver house in 2009, the same year the city gave the go-ahead to laneway houses. So the idea of building one at the back of my own lot was always in the back of my mind.

In 2013, that wayward thought turned into reality and I became one of more than 1,000 Vancouverites who have been issued permits to build a laneway house. And now the real fun begins.

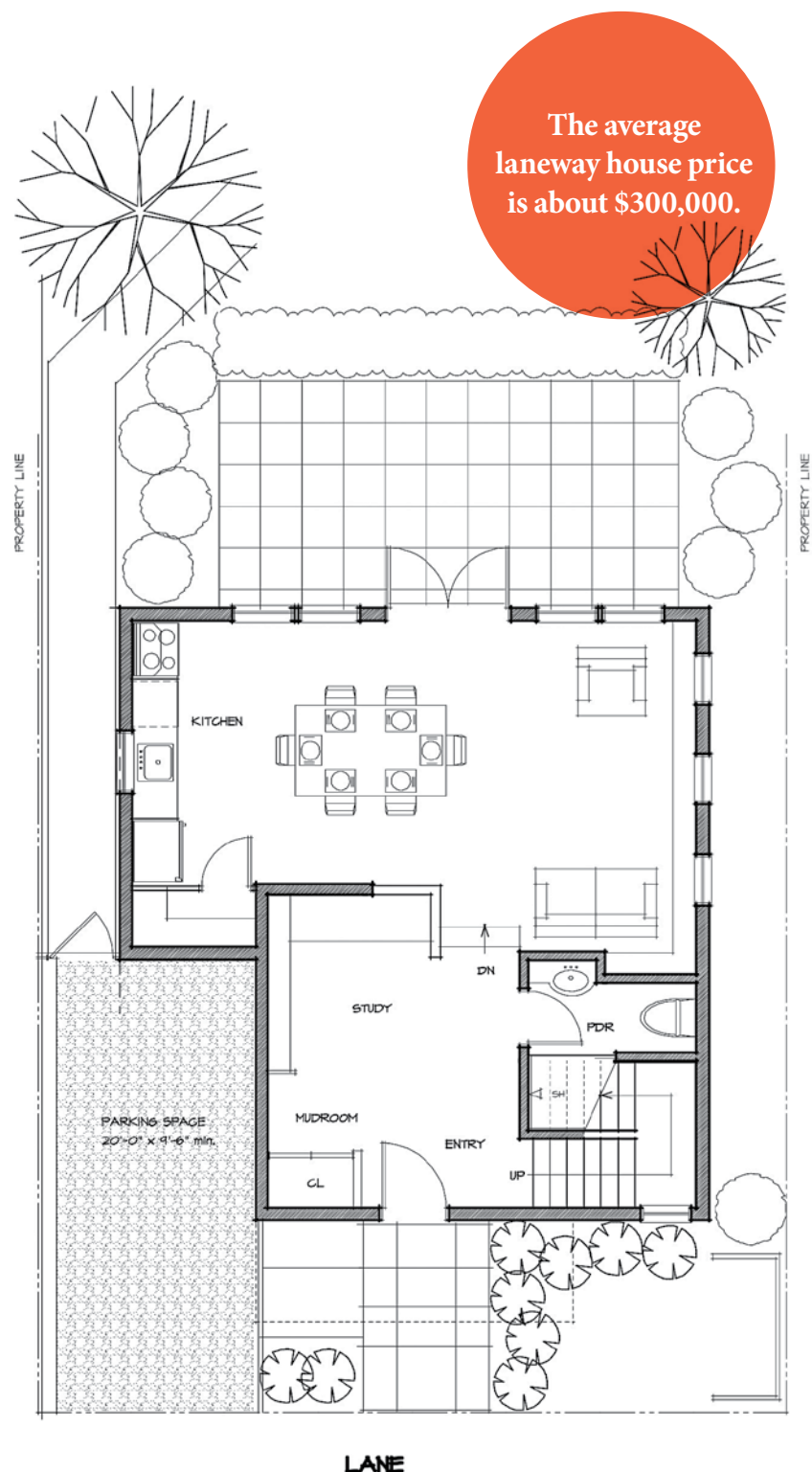
A laneway house isn't for everyone, but it makes perfect sense for me. I'm smack in the middle of the boomer demographic, so I've been thinking about downsizing and providing myself with an income stream for my future retirement. But I can't see myself in a condo because I love my garden and I have an emotional attachment to my East Vancouver neighbourhood, where condos are few and far between.

So for me, the best solution is to move out of the top floor of my two-suite home, rent out both units and move into a custom-built laneway house.

I thought about my lifestyle and wrote a wish list. My first step was to secure financing. Because I have enough equity in my property combined with potential rental income, I obtained a line of credit from Vancity, but if you don't have enough equity Vancity also offers Laneway House mortgages.

But first I did some homework. Many people opt for a company like Smallworks or Lanefab, but they were over my budget. You can DIY without an architect or contractor but it takes a lot of patience and zoning knowledge. Of course cost and space dictate what I want versus what I need, so I found an architect and contractor to arrive somewhere in between.

(Make sure you feel comfy with a contractor because you're going to be up-close and personal for about six months.) Wilson Newland does a lot of renovations in East Vancouver and Bill Newland works closely with architect Jonathan Ehling. They listened to my needs and concerns and designed a plan within my budget.



## TYPES OF BACKYARD ABODES

The City of Vancouver defines a laneway house as “situated at the rear of a lot near the lane and includes both a dwelling unit and parking.” (Changes to the Laneway House regulations in June 2013 removed the requirement that parking be completely enclosed.) A laneway house is only permitted in RS single family zones, where there aren't townhouses or duplexes. Further, a laneway house can only be for family use or rental: strata-titling is not permitted.

A coach or carriage house, originally built to house horse-drawn coaches and carriages and sometimes their drivers, is “a separate, smaller dwelling unit, often located above or attached to a garage, built on a residential lot occupied by a primary residence,” according to the District of West Vancouver. Coach houses are also built above an existing garage. For instance, the City of Coquitlam in 2012 approved Morningstar Homes' 34-home development with 21 of the houses, including a one-bedroom coach house, above the garage.

“The City of Vancouver would consider a suite over a garage as a laneway house but suites over an existing garage are not permitted,” says Sonia Erichsen, development services. “We are now issuing about 22 LWH permits per month.”

TO HELP DETERMINE IF YOUR PROPERTY IS ELIGIBLE, PHONE 604-873-7611. THE CITY OF VANCOUVER'S HOW-TO GUIDE DETERMINES WHAT KIND OF LANEWAY HOUSE YOU CAN BUILD AND EXPLAINS THE PERMIT APPLICATION PROCESS: [www.vancouver.ca/files/cov/laneway-housing-howto-guide.pdf](http://www.vancouver.ca/files/cov/laneway-housing-howto-guide.pdf)

For instance, I love cooking and entertaining invariably revolves around the kitchen so I don't need a living room. On the “must have” list is a mud room for the dogs, bathroom with shower downstairs (for humans and canines) and upstairs a soaker bathtub and walk-in closet. Add office space, a comfy area for TV and reading and that pretty much fits into 950 square feet, which is the maximum size the city allows. (To figure out what you can build multiply the square footage of your property by 0.16.)

Judging from the popularity of the recent Vancouver Heritage Foundation's Laneway House Tour (and driving around Vancouver's lanes), laneway houses are the new norm. Viewing these properties confirmed my “open design” decision: small isn't necessarily beautiful. One 600-square-foot house squeezed in two claustrophobic bedrooms; a smaller house with one bedroom didn't even have a closet.

The 970-square-foot property I drooled over cost almost \$500,000 – the bathroom fixtures and sliding glass doors alone would eat into a few years' mortgage payments. (Generally the average laneway house price is about \$300,000, including permits, sewer and utilities hookups.) The tour also decided my flooring choice: concrete with radiant heat on the ground floor and laminate or bamboo upstairs.

I've never been that much interested in floors and furnishings. I can barely bang a nail into the wall and my toolbox is a joke but that's about to change. At the risk of pestering my friends I now quiz them on countertop preferences and tankless water systems rather than “read any good books lately.” Now my reading list comprises anything about small home design. •

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