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# Innovation, imagination, and adventure in Toronto's laneways



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435 Grace St., Toronto.

CRAIG RACE ARCHITECTURE

Oh, what a difference a couple of years can make.

Back in 2019, when the first batch of laneway houses under the new-and-improved bylaws were taking final form, architecture aficionados were kicking up dust in the scant few alleyways that boasted the new typology and, like children at the toy store window in December, fogging up the glass with pressed noses to peek inside.

Now, with dozens and dozens built and dozens more on the books, there is a collective yawn by the general public when an owner is handed the keys to his or her new (back) door.

### Are fixer uppers an affordable way to get into pricey real-estate markets?

### The perils of passing down the family cottage

“Laneway suites are a dime a dozen these days, fortunately,” architect Craig Race says with a laugh. Mr Race, who, with other can-do folk and a few key city councillors, was instrumental in the bylaw change after putting in years of work, consultation with thousands of Torontonians and public meetings.

And while it's not really true that boredom has set in, only those suites with pizzazz are getting flashbulbs popping and neighbourhood tongues a-wagging. One reason may be because, with the laundry list of setbacks and angular plane requirements, many laneway suites look rather alike, with similarly sloped roofs and big chunky dormers (it should be noted that a laneway suite, while an independent building, must take its utilities from the main house).





An intriguing backsplash adds pop to the kitchen.

CRAIG RACE ARCHITECTURE

A wall of sanctioned graffiti can help get one noticed, however. When Mr. Race presented developer/owner of 435 Grace St., Leonid Kotov of Green Street Flats, with a towering wall of boring stucco on the laneway-facing side of his new building, Mr. Kotov rung up artist Chris Perez.

“I told him what I was thinking,” Mr. Kotov says. “I liked his style, it’s very floral ... but I don’t want to limit [him] in what [he’s] going to create; so he went off a little bit in a different direction.” The result, plump, swirling “space flowers” in luxurious purples, pinks and reds, befits the suite’s bold interior, where leafy wallpaper adorns a powder room and interesting tile populates the kitchen and upstairs bathrooms.

“Obviously you can’t sell laneway houses, but we took it as, if we were going to sell it, this is how we’d build it,” Mr. Kotov says of the 1,200-sqaure-foot, three-bedroom building near Bickford Park. “We chose things that stand out.”

“The name of the game here was twofold,” Mr. Race says. “One was getting as many bedrooms as possible and two was making sure it felt like it didn’t have as many bedrooms as possible; we had to be really efficient with the space and make it feel open, and the open-riser stair was item number one to make that happen.”

The wide lot helped as well, as it did about four kilometres to the northwest in Corso Italia, where architect Gabriel Fain was tasked with delivering a laneway suite for homeowner Brandon Donnelly of Globizen Studio. Unfortunately, a massive tree next door – and its equally massive root system – didn’t want to co-operate.





Architect Gabriel Fain was tasked with delivering a laneway suite for homeowner Brandon Donnelly of Globizen Studio. Unfortunately, a massive tree next door – and its equally massive root system – didn't want to co-operate.

“Ideally you do a slab-on-grade here,” says Mr. Fain, who cut his teeth at KPMB Architects. “The Tree Protection Zone is the entire site!” The solution, he continues, was to insert eight helical piers between the roots and build a steel frame over the site to support the house instead. Of course, when they got to the roof, there were other obstacles with which to contend.

“We didn't have the exact height of one of the branches, so as we were building it Brandon and I were hanging onto some joists here and literally explaining [to builder Kilbarry Hill] how to fold this roof to get the branch to come within millimetres ... which ends up being a little bit of a sculptural feature.”

He's right: stand in the double-height space on the main floor, look up, and a skylight frames the muscular branches perfectly; climb the mint green stair to the second floor and admire the various folds in the ceiling that allow tree and laneway suite to co-exist.

Of course there are other features to ogle in this 850-square-foot house. Choosing a palette of nothing but black, white and dove grey for the Scavolini kitchen – the moody, broody, black powder room is quite the sight – the only break from all the boldness is the raw, exposed wood ceiling, complete with manufacturer stamps.

“I would wake up at three in the morning and text at Gab: ‘Are we doing the right thing with the ceiling?’” Mr. Donnelly says with a laugh at the memory (his tenants love it).



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CRAIG RACE ARCHITECTURE

Upstairs, a study nook in the suite's only bedroom seems much larger because of the trapezoidal window that looks back into the double-height space and skylight; it's a little touch, but it makes a big difference in spatial perception. “Could you have fit a second bedroom in here without that?” Mr. Donnelly asks. “Maybe, but this is so cool.”

It is cool. And both dwellings prove that, despite the limitations, there is room still for innovation, imagination and adventure in the laneway. So bring on the barrel-vault, the folded plate or the butterfly roof; bring on the pyramidal and polygonal dormers; bring on bold interiors that borrow light and space from the outdoors ... all while respecting the trees, of course.

“The good architects make really good-looking laneway suites,” Mr. Race says. “We're certainly trying.”

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