

AT HOME

Small Wonder

A Vancouver couple finds room for three in a stylish-yet-practical laneway home

With a baby on the way, Meagan and Kris Smith had outgrown their one-bedroom apartment in Vancouver's Olympic Village. The upgrade?

A laneway house on the east side. Here, the couple open up about living in their 850-square-foot dream house. ►

by Janet Gyenes





What made you decide to rent a laneway house?

Meagan: We were really open in what we were looking for. We just wanted more space. And when we found this place, it was like a little house. It was kind of perfect.

What’s the house itself like?

Meagan: It’s a one-level house but it looks like it could be two, because the living-dining-kitchen area has a vaulted ceiling, and it’s one massive room. We really like the open concept. The kitchen, for us, is huge! Kris and I both like to cook. Today we were able to be in the kitchen together. In our condo it was an issue.

Kris: The builders, Smallworks, did really well with the architecture to maximize the amount of light and maintain the privacy. They’ve been quite strategic with the window placements.

Are there any challenges to living here?

Meagan: There’s definitely limited storage. We got a bit creative with the closet and used some good storage solutions.

Kris: They’ve really maximized the space for day-to-day living. I bike to work every now and then. Right now there’s nowhere to put my bike, so it’s kind of become part of the furniture. There’s definitely an opportunity to build some outdoor storage.

You live in your landlord’s backyard and face a lane. Is privacy a concern?

Meagan: It’s quite separate. If we’re both in our yards we see each other, but the landlords are lovely.

Kris: The front of the kitchen has a window into the lane. It’s up to you: Do you want people



Building on one level helped maximize space in this laneway home – partly by eliminating the need for space-hogging stairwells; (top right) high windows maximize light and privacy in the bedroom; (bottom left) polished concrete floors transition to cork in the kitchen, where tired feet most need soothing; (bottom right) sliding doors in the living room make the most of the entrance space.



AN UPSIZE AND A DOWNSIZE

Moving into a laneway home was a size upgrade for renters Kris and Meagan Smith. But the owners built the house with plans to eventually downsize, and use it as a pied-à-terre when they retire, says Jake Fry, founder and principal of Smallworks, the builder.

What makes the space livable? "Every room has a connection to the ground floor. Although the square footage is comparable to a condo, you have a big deck or patio," says Fry, whose company specializes in laneway homes and other small residences. "You have this contact with the outside you don't typically have with a smaller living environment."

Laneway homes have become more popular in recent years, as Vancouver's municipal government alters zoning in some residential areas to allow greater density – and provide much-needed rental housing.

Design-wise, the goal was to balance the West Coast modern aesthetic of the laneway home with the circa-1930s principal home – and it worked out well, says Fry. The next imperative? Maximizing built-in storage space such as shelving and closets.

"The more built-ins and customized furniture, the more opportunities for storage," he says. "We are able to treat these homes much like sailboats: you may not have extra rooms, but you have what you need to live comfortably."





TIP!

A landlord's insurance policy doesn't provide contents or liability coverage for tenants. Renters must purchase their own insurance.

to see in? I just close the blinds at night and when we're not home. When we are home, I open them so you can see what's going on in the lane. We used to live off Main Street and our balcony backed onto a lane. We knew what to expect in terms of the type of traffic that comes by: you've got your neighbours taking their dogs for a walk, kids in the lane playing hockey and, of course, your "recycling artists."

What makes the house livable?

Kris: The fact that it's on ground level. A lot of laneway homes are built on top of a garage – there are no stairs here, so I think it is going to be great once the baby comes. The outdoor space is also nice. We have a sitting area with a patio. I got my full-sized barbecue back!

Meagan: We have a little yard, too. We've never had that before. We planted a veggie garden.

How does living in a laneway house compare to condo living?

Kris: It's fantastic. I love the fact that I can see my car. We have two driveways that come with the laneway home, on either side of the home. I've lived in Canada for 10 years now [I'm originally from Scotland] and I've always lived in apartments. This is a nice change.

Meagan: We don't have to deal with an elevator any more. We just walk into the house. Overall, I think the house is just the right size for us. We wouldn't want it to be much smaller. ■

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SMALL SPACE DESIGN HACKS

Andrew Barker, of AJ Barker Design in Vancouver, has designed more than 30 condos and townhouses. He offers these tips for making the most of a tiny living space, without sacrificing style:

Sneak storage. "Start by integrating as much storage as you can into lost or unused space," says Barker. For instance: transform the bottom two steps of a staircase into drawers, to hide items such as dog leashes and shoes.

Choose drawers over cupboards. You can fit more into drawers. Barker recommends installing drawers in bathrooms and kitchens to create space for items that often get corralled into baskets and boxes, or crammed into the backs of cupboards.

Float the bathroom vanity. It might seem counterintuitive, but don't take your bathroom cabinet all the way down to the floor. Float it about 25 cm up to create visual space, says Barker. Also: consider a wall-mounted, mirrored, medicine cabinet to store items like medications, razors and makeup. Medicine cabinets are shallow compared to cupboards; plus, many are recessed into the wall.

Consider a kitchen nook. Install storage benches or banquettes in the kitchen instead of space-hogging dining sets. But don't think 1970s throwback, he says. These modern upholstered pieces add comfort and can fit seamlessly into any design style.

Mount your TV. Hang your television on the wall rather than perching it on top of a cabinet. No reinforced wall? Try a floor-to-ceiling pole. These are typically used in commercial spaces, but can work in homes, too, says Barker.

Slide, don't swing. Use sliding barn or pocket doors instead of hinged doors, which swing out around 80 cm, wasting valuable wall space.

Streamline floor styles. Use one flooring material throughout the space – except, perhaps, for tile in the bathrooms, says Barker: "Don't mix tile, laminate, carpet and hardwood. Having all those different materials just chops the space up." –Janet Gyenes