

Escape the city streets for laneways: More developers are digging there

Back alley builds: Architects Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe received a Governor-General's award for their home on Leslie Garden Lane.

Life in the lane

BY GEORGIE BINKS

To the average eye, the laneway behind the stores on College Street, west of Dufferin, is just a laneway; garages on one side, on the other, a vacant lot, garbage stuck in the overgrown weeds. But to developer Brad Lamb, it is the face of the future.

In a city where land for one house can cost more than \$1-million and there is almost no new space available for building downtown, Mr. Lamb has chosen a laneway to locate his latest development, which he calls The Coach Houses off College Street.

Mr. Lamb plans to build 19, four-storey, 1,100-square-foot homes of concrete, wood and brick and sell them for \$269,900. The garages will be on the first floor, with the living space on the three floors above.

It takes a special kind of person to live in a laneway, Mr. Lamb notes. "We picked this because what people are always looking for is back-lane, hard-to-get-to properties. It's almost like the harder it is to find, the cooler it is.

There's a whole generation of people in their twenties, thirties and forties, who want to live a bohemian lifestyle. They wear a suit to work everyday, but they go home and they love the idea of having a dinner party and their friends say 'I can't find it, where in the hell is it?'"

One of the challenges in laneway building is to ensure it is not incongruous with its surroundings, but at the same time is attractive. In other words, you want it to blend with the surrounding garages, but not look like one.

Walter Harhay, president of Harhay Construction Management and the contractor/developer for The Coach Houses off College Street explains, "We took pictures up and down the lane in the fall with the colours. The intent is to try to live with the nature of the lane, which is a lot of different colours, textures and so on. That is why the building is designed with lots of different colours and textures."

There is no street address because many of the laneways being developed do not have names, although if you put a house on it, you can ask the City of Toronto to name it. There usually is not much of a view either, unless of course

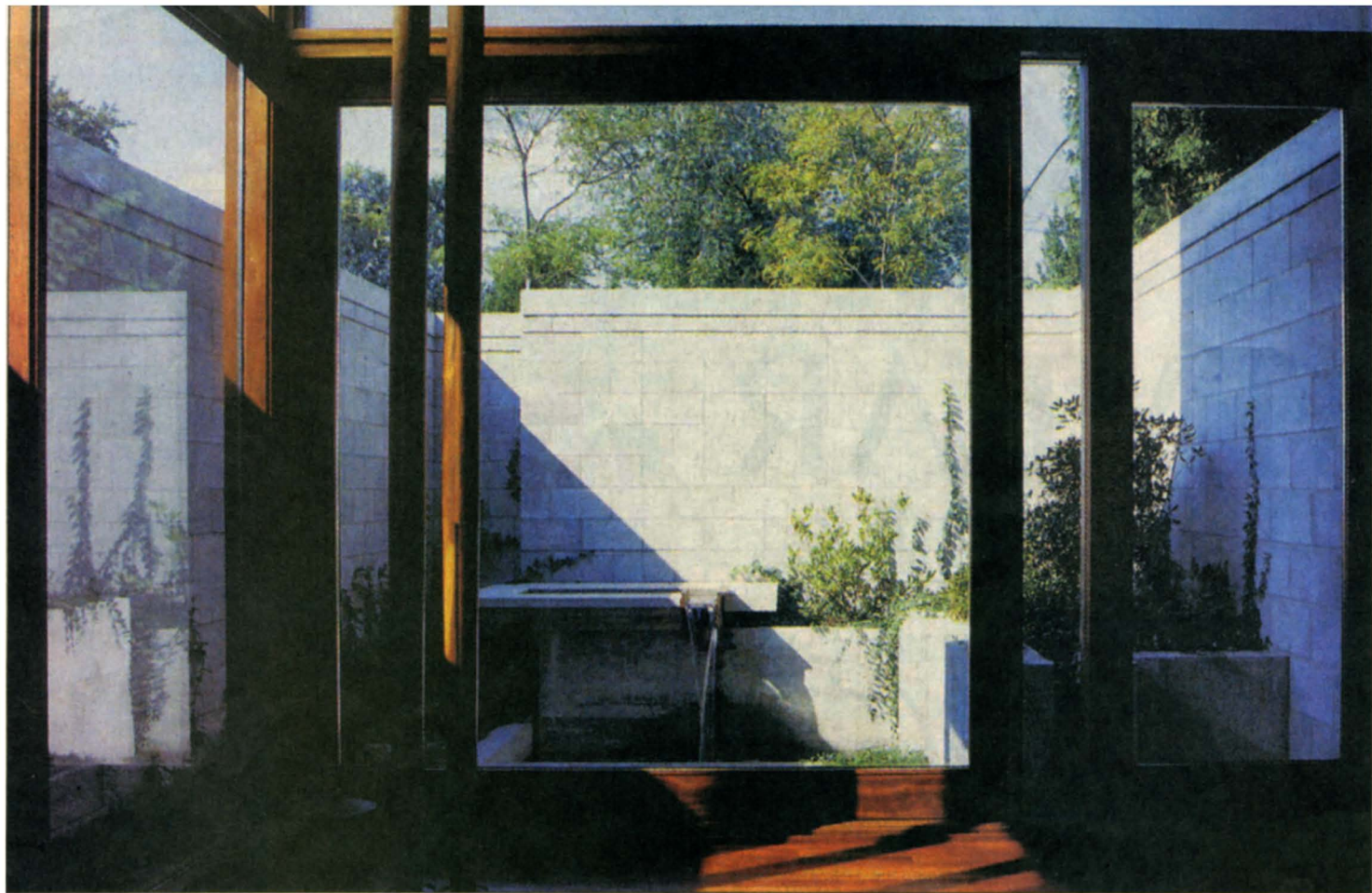
you do not mind looking at the backs of stores or someone else's garage.

The biggest challenge, though, is the initial one, which involves winning approval from the City. Mr. Harhay says, while the City is on board with this development, there is a technical problem. "This is a house behind a house." It is a concept the City does not like.

Greg Lintern, a manager in the City of Toronto's community planning department says: "There are issues of privacy, overlook, the impact on someone's enjoyment of their own open space, how will they be serviced [water, sewage, garbage]. Will it be from the laneway, or the front?"

John Benczkowski, another Toronto architect, who sees a housing opportunity when he looks at laneways, is currently trying to win approval for 11 loftstyle condominiums, off a lane in the area of Dupont and Bathurst streets. He also just designed a house that will be the ultimate in laneway living; a dwelling for a homeowner on Dewson Street, at Ossington Avenue and Dundas Street, which will be at the back of his lot and have three laneways dead-end on to the land on which the house will be built.

See *LANEWAY HOMES* on Page PH4



YVONNE BERG / NATIONAL POST

Clockwise from top: The Shim-Sutcliffe laneway development near Jones and Gerrard; Walter Harhay (left), president of Harhay Construction Management, and Brad Lamb, president of Brad J. Lamb Realty, at the site of the future Coach Houses off College, bottom left.

There are Torontonians who long to live at hard-to-find addresses

Buffer zone in big city

LANEWAY HOMES

Continued from Page PH1

Architects Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe designed one of Toronto's best-known laneway houses 10 years ago and have never looked back.

Ms. Shim says they found three small adjoining vacant lots, behind Curzon Street near Jones Avenue and Gerrard Street East, combined them into one 17x106-foot lot, and built a 1,350-square-foot home of wood and concrete block. The home, unofficially known as Laneway House, offers a great deal of privacy.

"We are actually quite buffered. There are the houses, the backyards and then the garages. You feel distant from the city," she says.

The couple were allowed to name their laneway — they chose LeslieGarden Lane — making it easier for people to find them, although they still have to be concise with directions.

"We actually do get take-out Chinese food and mail delivered. You don't get any junk mail, which is good."

Despite having won a Governor-General's award for architecture, the couple had to go all the way to the Ontario Municipal Board for approval, something many laneway inhabitants

find themselves doing.

The approval process involves either asking for a minor variance from the Committee of Adjustment or for rezoning from City Council. If you are turned down, you can appeal to the OMB.

Michael Vaughan, a development lawyer, says that can cost as much as \$20,000, but he believes Toronto is starting to be more positive toward laneway developments.

"You have two choices," he says. "One is to wipe out neighbourhoods and replace them with high-rises; that was the choice of the '60s.

"The other way is to take the existing fabric and allow it to grow a little bit here, a little there. If you allow the city to intensify slowly you can produce the same densities you can with 20-storey office towers."

Architect Alan Littlewood lives in a laneway development on Croft Street, which he designed. He has also built several others and feels it is something the City should be supporting.

"First of all, there is an intensification for the city, which I think is a good idea, because it makes better use of the land. Second, housing on lanes adds to the diversity of the housing stock available. Third, it brings a degree of security and civility to the rear lanes."

National Post