



SMART GROWTH BRIEF

BACK LANES

THE BACK LANE

Back lanes conjure up two very different images. One is the dirty and dangerous urban alley where criminals lurk and the dark and law-abiding people scurry by. It's dark and full of the nasty elements of city life.

The other image is a special place in the neighbourhood where children learn to ride bikes or explore, where neighbours walk their dogs or stop to chat away from the street in front. It's a safer alternative for walking, cycling or road hockey and is often a semi-public space dominated by the adjacent residents.

Lanes are a utilitarian place, according to Cook (1998), narrower than a street that generally exists in areas with a certain density of people. The primary purpose of a lane is access to the adjacent lots, but it is also a place for garages, garbage, utilities, deliveries, storage, fences, gardens, clotheslines, or parking cars.

This brief will provide an overview of the place of the lane in urban development in North America, and how the lane is re-emerging as an important component of urban landscapes. Design elements that contribute to its success will be identified along with the place of back lanes in the Smart Growth St. Albert initiative.

A lane can be many things depending on the community around it. It is the role of the city to help shape what the lanes can become. Cook (1998) cites Grady Clay about the potential of back lanes:

"It is now time to consider the lane, and what it might become – a hidden resource waiting to be recognized."

LANES – THE OTHER CITY

In early North American cities, wealthy homeowners lived in homes facing the streets, while the 'hired help' lived in homes that faced the lanes. This was more prevalent as they tried to accommodate a huge demand for housing in the cities. The network of laneways had a life of their own with homes and businesses, delivery vehicles and at night the community life of the residents.

Reformers, the introduction of the trolleys and streetcars, and changes in employment opportunities all contributed to the 'hired help' being able to live elsewhere, to take different types of jobs and, in the words of the reformers, wealthy do-gooders who were not a part of the alley-dwelling life, to remove these 'breeding grounds for crime and disease'.

DISAPPEARING LANES

There were a number of factors that likely contributed to the decreasing use of lanes. The growing middle class sought more or less equal access to a full street, a move away from a reminder of their alley-dwelling past. Another contributing factor was the US federal administration's establishment of regulations for city development based on a couple of key elements:

- A focus on the car rather than the pedestrian;

- Rural, suburban development ideals like the Garden City concept initially implemented in places like Radburn, NJ had long, meandering streets without alleys; and
- A growing profit-minded approach that created a cheaper, easier way to lay out a neighbourhood and allowed more houses to be built with greater profit by, among other things, eliminating alleys as well as the connected green space of the Radburn model that had replaced the alleys and provided pedestrian access to other areas in the neighbourhood and to nearby services.

There were a number of impacts of this move away from lanes on the development of the neighbourhoods we see today:

- Due to access issues from a single side, lots were widened to accommodate a driveway or garage, as well as access for emergencies such as fire. To counteract the additional costs of wider lots, they have gradually moved to including the garage on the front of the house to allow for narrower lots;
- The garbage was moved to the front, and utilities were placed in an easement or in street;
- Larger items were now stored on driveways; and
- Sidewalks are often eliminated.

So the streets have essentially become both streets and lanes.

RE-EMERGENCE OF THE LANE

Back lanes haven't disappeared completely, though. Where they exist, they're being assessed for how they can once again become part of the city. In Traditional Neighbourhood Development, they're seen as an integral part of new development to create walkable, well-connected neighbourhoods.

There have been a number of ways communities have started to relook at lanes.

Eliminating mis-used lanes

Some cities (Clarke, no date) in an effort to reduce crime, impose street or alley closures. Evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach has been minimal. Where they have been found successful, usually in central urban areas with serious drug or prostitution issues, there are usually a number of other measures that were implemented simultaneously so it isn't possible to separate the impact of the closures.

In suburban areas, it is generally property crime that is more of an issue. One study found closing alleys was effective in reducing crime, while another found very little difference.

Unfortunately, the crime is often just moved to another area, rather than eliminated, and often the crime reduction impact is temporary.

Liverpool, UK, has closed a number of alleys in its suburban neighbourhoods to reduce crime. (Landman, 2003) However, many of their alleys are too narrow for vehicles so are different than what we generally see in North America.



Tenney Alley in Fort Collins is part of a new pedestrian system being developed using old alleys.

Eliminating unused lanes

The City of Windsor has moved much of the servicing, such as garbage removal, to the front streets. They have a program whereby residents, if a sufficient number agree, can buy back the alley and add it to their properties. (City of Windsor, No date)

Reclaiming lanes

There is a much larger movement towards reclaiming lanes as part of the City's Public Realm.

Fort Collins, Colorado has a *Downtown Lanes Master Plan Report* that outlines a plan to create pedestrian connections between key destinations through existing lanes throughout its central area. (Hoaglund, 2006) As part of this program, the City has local artists paint the transformer cabinets in the alley to help minimize the utilitarian aspect of the alley while crating a greater sense of the alley's place in the Public Realm.

Chicago (Chicago DOT, no date) has a program to green its 1,900 miles of back lanes. This involves replacing the surface with a combination of porous concrete above and a stone filtration layer below for the same price as concrete. This new pavement reflects the sun's heat, making the area cooler in summer and warmer in winter, and helps filter storm water rather than return it all to the storm systems.

Los Angeles (Berg, 2009) is doing a similar redevelopment of alleys, but is also going a step further. In some neighbourhoods they are looking at using alleys as a 'shadow network' of green neighbourhood connectors to include benches, solar lighting, display structures and lead to key commercial and public facilities and bring more park space closer to the residents.

The City of Vancouver (Appelbe, 2009) approved a policy allowing 100 homeowners to develop laneway housing. Their Council is currently debating applying this policy to all residential areas in the City. The City of Edmonton allows above-garage suites in a number of areas. This is also a common feature in Orenco Station, a transit-oriented community outside of Portland.

This will add needed housing, increases densities and provides more 'eyes on the street' for the lanes to improve safety.

Creating new lanes

Lanes are an essential part of new urbanism and traditional neighbourhood development that helps create pedestrian-friendly environments and improve the connectivity of a neighbourhood. The challenge is not to create smaller streets and a second front yard for people. Part of the charm of residential alleys from times past went beyond the functional access for service vehicles and cars.

"The alleys also gave children a place to play beyond the constant surveillance of adults, and backyards fronting the alleys offered parents a break from the formal lawn care often associated with the front garden. These alleys were places where the barely contained chaos of domestic life was not just revealed, but celebrated." (Baker, 2005)



Source: B. Holtby
A back alley in a newer development in Chilliwack, BC, featuring shorter driveways and accessory units.

Martin (2002) suggests that for higher densities, duplicating access to lots actually "enhances both the range of resident choices as well as the diversity of social settings available to residents."

This move towards more compact development, through changing demographics and households, issues related to health and congestion, and a more pedestrian-oriented

approach to development, suggests lanes once again have a greater role to play in our urban environments.

DESIGN FEATURES TO ENHANCE LANES

It used to be hierarchy of wealthy to poor moving from the street to the lane, now it's a hierarchy of formality to informality. But informality does not mean forgotten or ignored.

A back lane needs care and effort to make it a useful landscape feature. By recognizing lanes as such, and ensuring there are design requirements for them, a municipality can go a long way to ensuring lanes are an integral part of the Public Realm, that residents will accept as part of their neighbourhood. As Cook (1998) suggests:

“The lane, like most other commons, benefits from the responsibility and care of homeowners around it.”

Engineering

Most alleys that people are familiar with were created many years ago and many of the physical challenges are due to the road construction technology of the time. Technological advances in roadway design and construction have been significant, and greatly contribute to making lanes more functional and attractive. There are also opportunities for improved drainage and even different approaches for stormwater management, like Chicago and Los Angeles are doing.

Accessory units

As mentioned previously, opportunities for housing and businesses to face the lane enhances the sense of community and of the lanes being part of the urban fabric. These units allow a greater safety factor with more “eyes on the street”, allow for increased density and a variety of housing choices.

Short garage access

Short garage access discourages parking or storing vehicles that impede movement through the lane.

Short fences and landscaping

Short fences and landscaping make the lane more visible and attractive. It encourages more visual permeability into the alley, discouraging those looking for a hidden place for nefarious activities.

Lighting

Good lighting is an important part of the success of the alley. Encouraging motion sensor lights on garages in addition to other lighting is an important design feature to enhance the lanes.

SMART GROWTH ST. ALBERT AND LANES

For the Smart Growth initiative, new neighbourhoods would continue to be developed without lanes. This is because boulevards would continue to be required along all local streets. If lanes were required by the City for all local streets as well as boulevards, St. Albert would need to provide compensation to the landowner for the land over the 30% maximum imposed by the Municipal Government for roadways, public utilities and stormwater facilities.

There are some challenges with not including lanes for local streets in the Smart Growth approach and still trying to achieve a streetscape where the building façade, rather than the garage dominates.

- the garage front must be minimized to create a more pedestrian oriented streetscape;

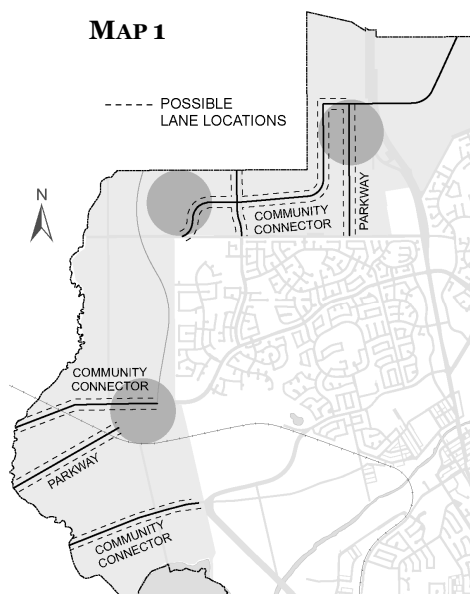
- lots need to be wider to accommodate a side driveway or a house that has no more than 50% of the front as garage; and
- garages can be no further forward than the front of the house.

The Smart Growth St. Albert approach proposes a number of options to counteract these challenges such as shared driveways, shared parking areas and considering the driveway as a required parking stall.

With the Smart Growth initiative, it is proposed that lanes be used only for the Community Connector Street corridors (arterials) and the Parkway Street corridors, as shown on **Map 1**. There would be a total lane length of back lanes for the Community Connectors of approximately 15.6 km and 6.96 km for the Parkways. This accounts for only three percent of total coverage of the land.

This would provide a number of benefits:

- provide some opportunities for lower-density residential development along back lanes opposite these. The lanes allow for smaller lot development and can act as an effective transition from the medium density of the Community Connectors and Parkways to the local streets;
- ensure a more efficient flow of through-traffic on the arterials by limiting access points off the street, making it more feasible to encourage more access points to the arterial from local streets which improves the connectivity of the street system;
- allow for more on-street parking which can supplement visitor/customer parking;
- ensure an unimpeded and safer flow for pedestrians and bicycles on the sidewalk by minimizing conflicts between them and vehicles accessing adjacent lots; and
- allows for an unimpeded streetfront of facades along the key pedestrian streets creating a more vibrant streetscape to encourage walkability.



CONCLUSION

Back lanes, whether in a commercial downtown area or a residential neighbourhood, are public spaces in private location. They have often become forgotten spaces about which no one seems to care, which is what attracts problems. (Clay, cited in Cook, 1998).

To facilitate effective Smart Growth development approach, lanes need to be provided for at least the Community Connector and Parkway Street Corridors to ensure the Parkway remains a pedestrian focal point and to enhance the safety of the street corridor and its role as a public place. It separates access to buildings along it

However, there needs to be clear guidelines for their design and the design of buildings and lots around them to encourage successful urban spaces. As Cook (1998) suggests:

“A walk down a lane is almost a walk through someone’s home; a walk through the garden extension of the living room, an experience rarely repeated in modern suburbia. What a walk down a lane offers is not found as often today: a true glimpse into the backyard of human life.”

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