

LEE LIMING
PROGRAMME IN
AGEING URBANISM

Housing for Older Population¹

Accessory Dwelling Units
(ADU)- a new housing
option for the elderly

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What is an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)?

An Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) is an addition (a second small dwelling) to an existing residential building. ADUs are usually smaller and built on excess plot space of the primary unit (single-family unit). They are often low-cost pre-fabricated living options that can be built using environment- friendly materials. They can be built as part of an existing house by adding spaces or using the existing spare spaces (like attic, garage, basement) and also by construction of a new structure. These living spaces can be equipped with living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom facilities, and may be attached or detached from the main residence.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more

examples and cases over time.

They have been variously referred to as ‘accessory apartments’, ‘second dwelling units’, ‘back houses’, ‘granny flats’, ‘mother-in-law apartments’, ‘dependencies’, ‘secondary suites’, or ‘laneway houses’. In recent times, they are also referred to as ‘alley flats’ or ‘laneway housing’.

In legal terms, these units cannot be bought or sold separately (without the main house). Some of the main purposes for which people choose to build ADUs on their plot include:

- To extend home space to accommodate more family members. In most cases for elderly parents.
- To downsize to smaller house due to financial (to offset mortgage) or spatial constraints (for elderly) while continuing to live in familiar neighbourhood (age-in-place for older people).
- To accommodate workspace close to home (mostly for people with their own professional practices).

ADUs house extended families, elderly members and in some cases, outsiders as a form of additional income for owners. The main advantage of such units is that once the desired purpose is fulfilled, they can be reused for other purposes based on the changing needs of the owners and can even be removed completely.

Origin and Evolution

The origin of ADUs can be traced to the ‘granny flats’ initiated in the state of Victoria, Australia in 1972. These flats were designed to house older family members who were not able to live alone, but wanted to age-in-place. They were typically small, made of recyclable materials, and relatively inexpensive living spaces. They were usually modular in nature and assembled at site. When not needed they could be taken away, refurbished and reused.

Although most granny flats have a separate entrance, kitchen, bathroom and living area, some have a connecting door to the main house from the inside for easy access. They are generally located above the garage or at the rear of the house. A typical plan is about 450 to 650 square feet, depending on the costs and layout preferences of the potential resident.

The granny flats are also called ‘mother-in-law house’, ‘granny suite’, ‘in-law suite’ or ‘accessory apartment’ and collectively as ‘Elder Cottage Housing Opportunities’ (ECHO). This concept has been replicated in the UK and Canada (in 1980s) and USA (by 1990s).

Case Studies

ADUs have been advocated over the years by planners and policymakers as an adaptive and affordable housing form that can facilitate social enhancement in the community,

especially for the elderly. The following are some examples in various cities.

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ADUs, commonly known in Vancouver as ‘Laneway Houses’, were introduced to overcome the shortcomings of a growingly expensive housing market. The strategy was to multiply the proportion of middle-income people living within popular residential areas without disturbing the cosy character of neighbourhoods.

This housing solution was initiated by the City Council in 2006 and about 2,000 laneway houses were erected within 6 years. Its provision was supported by laying out simple steps to attain eligibility permit for homeowners. For example, the owners are not required to be staying in the ADU or the main home.

In spite of the high bureaucratic regulations (e.g. parking, ownership, etc.) associated with these units, the private sector has also been involved in the building of these houses. The construction of these small, efficient rental units in the city has been yielding considerable profits.

Seattle, Washington, USA

In order to increase the housing stock for the projected increase in population, the Seattle

Planning Department in 1996 legalized ADU in single-family residential areas as a form of alternate housing. In Seattle, there are two types of ADU: ‘accessory dwelling unit’, which is a legally permitted unit in the home and ‘backyard cottage’ or ‘detached accessory dwelling unit’ (DADU), which is a legally permitted unit on the property (but not within the home). The Seattle Planning Commission has published separate sets of building regulations for ADU and DADU. The City Council and the Planning Commission have many other regulations for the design and maintenance of these units. These range from site conditions to universal access of the units. For example, DADU is usually a slightly bigger unit when compared to ADU. Both would require separate off-street parking space. Unlike in Vancouver, the owner of the property is required to live in the primary unit or in the ADU/DADU.

Portland, Oregon, USA

Portland has been a frontrunner in the development of ADU for the past few years. Portland encourages the building of these units by easing the regulations. Given some conditions for square footage and placement on the lots, the City of Portland Bureau of Development Services permits ADU on most single-family lots. Portland does not require the owner to be an occupant at the ADU or

primary dwelling. The requirement for off-street parking for the ADU is also waived.

Recent studies on ADU by the Department of Environmental Qualities, Oregon, revealed that 80% of ADUs in Portland were being used as long-term primary residences. Majority of the owners chose to stay at the premises even though there was no such rule. These units housed family members (elderly parents, teenage children, etc.) of the main occupants.

ADUs were also found to cater to elderly persons as places of residence and as an asset to own/rent. Many ADUs were owned by the younger old (aged 55-64).

Austin, Texas, USA

The introduction of ADU in Austin is a relatively new initiative. The land-use code supported this development in 2001 based on lessons learnt from the Portland model. In Austin, it was adopted as a 'secondary dwelling unit' (SDU).

Around 2003, Austin developed the Alley Flat Initiative (AFI) in collaboration with the University of Texas Center for Sustainable Development (UTCSD), the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation (GNDC), and the Austin Community Design and Development Center (ACDDC). This team also engaged local housing and

environmental activists as consultants for the process. This initiative was aimed at creating flexible, adaptive and affordable housing in Austin. The objective was to: (a) create efficient designs and construction techniques that employ sustainable methods, and (b) use innovative home ownership and financing that are beneficial to all neighbourhoods.

The regulation for building these alley flats is a combination of previous examples. In Austin, the owner is required to be residing in the primary unit or the alley flat. Also, if the property is located within 0.25 miles to a transport route, these flats are exempted from providing any off-street parking. The minimum lot size requirement for an alley flat is 5,740 square feet and the structure must be limited to 1,100 square feet.

Singapore

In Singapore, this concept was first introduced by the Housing and Development Board as 'granny flats' in 1987. These flats were targeted to cater to multi-generational living for families and promote older parents to live close to their children. These flats had a separate entrance, living room, bedroom, bath and kitchen. But, there were not many takers and granny flats were soon discontinued.

In recent years, with an aging population, a similar typology called the '3Gen flats' has

been reintroduced in 2013. The estimated floor area is 115 sq m- 120 sq m. These flats are designed for multi-generation families to stay under one roof and support the needs of larger families. This scheme is expected to encourage older people to live close to family, for multi-generation interaction and eventually to enable older people to age-in-place.

Merits and Demerits of Accessory Dwelling Units

ADU, apart from being a solution for housing deficit in cities, is found to be beneficial to both house owners and renters equally. Some of the merits include:

Benefits for Homeowners

- Facility for older adults to live alongside their family so that they can be taken care of when needed. Supports elderly to age-in-place independently
- Adult children can live with their parents without sacrificing on privacy
- Such units are affordable and flexible. When they become redundant, they can be dismantled or sold
- Resale value of such a property is bound to increase significantly as it might attract a lot of buyers. In some cases, like if the property is bought through a mortgage, there are also tax deductions
- They can become a source of extra income for owners in the form of rent.

Such additional income might prove to be beneficial, especially to the elderly and young homeowners.

Benefits for Renters

- It gives people an option to live in a more desirable residential neighbourhood (with better privacy, more amenities, lesser traffic, etc.) that they might not be able to afford otherwise.
- Due to their low construction costs, these units are usually available for reasonable rents.

There are demerits too. These include:

- Attaining the eligibility and approval for such units might be a tough process, depending on local regulations and rigid planning laws
- There is a major lack of public information about the correct procedures to build and register such units in most cities
- There is negative feedback from homeowners who complain about the lower liveability of neighbourhoods due to overcrowding, lack of parking space, declining of property values of such areas, etc.
- When this concept is introduced within apartment complexes, the flexibility and transformation of spaces seem to reduce.

Despite all the benefits of ADU, this housing option has not been a complete success everywhere. It is accepted in some cities more than others. But, housing observers anticipate that these units will gain in popularity with ageing population increase in cities. The reintroduction of this concept in Singapore as ‘3Gen flats’ in spite of the failure of ‘granny flats’ in the 1980s may be one such case.

Source: Alley Flat Initiative -Topics in Sustainable Development Report (2008), University of Texas School of Architecture, Accessed on May 30, 2016. <http://www.soa.utexas.edu/files/csd/AFI.pdf>;

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