

So You Want to Live in an ADU? Here's What to Consider

Owners and tenants of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) share key insights about how to navigate the unique living experience.

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With changes in laws and zoning restrictions in cities such as Los Angeles, Portland, Seattle, Dallas, and Chicago, accessory dwelling units (ADUs) are becoming increasingly common in the backyards of homes across the country. Also known as backyard cottages, in-law suites, granny flats, and carriage houses, ADUs are secondary housing units typically detached from a primary dwelling on a single-family residential lot. Many activists tout ADUs for creating affordable housing alternatives in dense urban environments. Homeowners can also rent the units out for additional income, and some people find the independent living structures to be great housing options for aging parents. The growing popularity of ADUs has many people wondering: What's it actually like to live in one? We spoke to a number of ADU residents and owners about the key factors to consider.

Privacy is key



Architects Bo Sundius and Hisako Ichiki built a backyard cottage on their Los Angeles property for Sundius's aging parents. The duo selected a pale shade of green for the lap wood siding so the home would blend into its lush landscape shrouded by trees and plantings. (Photo: Ye Rin Mok)

Moving into an ADU can be an adjustment for many reasons, namely the smaller size and shared lot. But the process can be smoother when the unit is equipped with design elements that promote privacy for residents. Think: separate entrances and patios, thoughtful window placements, and fences or natural landscaping barriers.

Architects Bo Sundius and Hisako Ichiki, the married couple behind Los Angeles practice Bunch Designs, take these factors into consideration when designing secondary housing units, whether for clients or in their own backyard. (The duo designed a 750-

square-foot ADU dubbed Elysian Cottage for Sundius's aging parents, which they now rent to tenants.) "Remember, the front house wasn't designed with the ADU in mind, so it probably has windows everywhere," Sundius says. "You have to work around that. We often pull the ADU away from the rear or side yards so they have a nice courtyard space that is totally private."



Architect Scott Mooney and construction engineer Lauren Shumaker built an ADU in the back half of their 5,000-square-foot lot in Portland, Oregon. The couple completed the 624-square-foot ADU for \$221,580 after eight months of work with help from Taylorsmith Sustainable Construction. (Photo by Lucy Wang)

Creating opportunities for seclusion was also important for Portland, Oregon, couple Lauren Shumaker and Scott Mooney—he an architect and she a construction engineer—when the duo designed a 624-square-foot ADU that they moved into so they could rent out their main home, spurred by the city's generous ADU incentives and a desire to reduce their environmental footprint. "The ADU massing and window placement minimized sight lines into the respective properties, so from a spatial perspective, it feels very private," Lauren explains. "The site layout also allows for our own separate gardens with a shared yard space."



Architect Peter Liang built a 265-square-foot ADU for his 82-year-old mother, Irmhild Liang, in his sister's backyard in Oakland, California. The unit is tucked behind the main house and has a separate entrance, which can be accessed by a path at the side of the property. (Photo: Gregg Segal)

When architect Peter Liang, principal of Blue Truck Studio, designed a 265-square-foot ADU for his aging mother in the backyard of his sister's Oakland, California, home, the architect made sure the ADU's separate entrance didn't face the back door of the main house so his mother could maintain a sense of independence. "She enters from the street along the side of the house, on her own pathway," explains Liang's sister, Stefanie Liang Chung, who lives in the primary residence. "From our house, she leaves through our backdoor and goes down the stairs to her home. We wanted my mother to feel like she could come and go privately, but also feel like the main house was easily accessible."

Get creative with storage



Scott and Lauren moved into the new backyard unit so they could rent out their main home. The ADU's living room features a built-in storage wall that holds Scott's extensive record collection. (Photo by Olivia Ashtonn)

Because ADUs are typically smaller than an average single-family house or apartment, the structures offer less room for storage—which means residents may find themselves challenged to conceal clothes, kitchenware, tools and equipment, and even personal mementos. For Peter and Stefanie's mother, Irmhild, downsizing was the most difficult part of moving into the ADU, dubbed Kleines Haus.

The 82-year-old woman went from a two-bedroom apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the 265-square-foot living space on her daughter's property. "While we had donated or left behind most of her furniture, there were boxes of sentimental things and collectibles from our childhood home," Stefanie explains. "There was another tedious round of sorting and organizing when she got here."



The Elysian Cottage features a split-level layout with the dining area located steps down from the living space. A timber staircase accesses the loft-like office and is wider at the bottom, where it doubles as shelving. (Photo by Ye Rin Mok)

Peter Quinn and Hannah Kallaoun, who now rent the backyard cottage on Sundius and Ichiki's property, had a similar struggle. When the couple toured the 750-square-foot Elysian Cottage, Peter was focused on one thing primarily: space. "Because it's completely open, we were most concerned with the storage at first, given that you get used to having closets and cabinets to hide clutter," says Peter. "We realized that most of the items we had in our garage at our previous home were things we hadn't seen or thought about in years. Once we sold or donated them, it felt like a weight had been lifted."

"Living in a smaller, more compact space has allowed us to only purchase what we need when we need it," adds Hannah.



Julie Fornasero and Tim Logan moved into a 544-square-foot ADU in their backyard and rented out their main house in San Anselmo, California. Limited storage in the kitchen requires the top of the refrigerator to be utilized and glassware to be stored on open shelves. (Photo by Darren Loveland)

In San Anselmo, California, Julie Fornasero and Tim Logan live in a 544-square-foot ADU by Studio Shed (a company with prefabricated ADUs that can be assembled on-site), and the duo rent out their 1,100-square-foot main house. Julie advises potential ADU tenants: "Make sure

you have enough storage, either within the ADU or in auxiliary structures, to fit your lifestyle." Creative solutions like wall-mounted bikes or under-bed storage can help keep things tidy without taking up too much square footage in an already small space.

Communication is vital



The space between Scott and Lauren's ADU and the existing bungalow, which they rent out to tenants, functions as a communal yard and garden. (Photo by Lucy Wang)

ADU tenants and main house residents should communicate openly about expectations for interactions, shared spaces, and visitors—even prior to the move-in date. "Setting expectations up front can minimize potential conflict later," says Lauren. Yard maintenance, for example, is something she speaks to renters about before they move into the main house on the single-family lot where she and Scott live. "Some tenants may want to garden and share a yard or other responsibilities, and some may be more hands-off," Lauren continues.

Stefanie agrees that open communication is imperative and points out small things that can make for a better living experience for ADU tenants. "Set up a separate mailbox, automatic lights, and shared outdoor storage," she says. "I think it's also important to establish rules around how you communicate—knocking on door vs calling—availability for help, what resources and supplies you share, and expectations around visitors and outdoor gatherings."

Potential ADU tenants should also be aware that separate utilities may not be set up for independent housing units, as is the case with the Elysian Cottage. "The tenants pay a basic rent and extra for all of the utilities, and we pay the actual utility bill and pass through the cost," says Sundius. "It's expensive and not worth the ADU to have separate meters."

Embrace the connection



The second-level bedroom in the Elysian Cottage features a white pegboard that blends into the wall. The ADU tenants, Peter Quinn and Hannah Kallaoun, added shelving with toys, artwork, and beloved items to decorate their young child's sleeping area. (Photo: Ye Rin Mok)

The ADU experience can facilitate neighborly engagement that's no longer typical in big cities. "We realized that the ADU allows for a community aspect to urban living," says Sundius. "We really do have neighbors we borrow sugar from and that is pretty special in urban Los Angeles." Hannah confirms the close relationship the ADU tenants have developed with the main house residents. "Their son asks for eggs, and we borrow vanilla extract; they share their citrus with us, and we give them any excess groceries we've accidentally bought," she says. "Their seven-year-old daughter comes by often and keeps me company while I cook or sit on the patio. She has brought so much joy during such a trying time."



One of Stefanie's children plays in the loft area of Kleines Haus while Irmhild reads in bed below. (Photo: Gregg Segal)

"We've become family with our tenants," adds Lauren about her main house residents. "We garden together, watch each other's pets when we're away, have dinner nights, and our tenant even helped with childcare during the most challenging times of the COVID shutdown."

For Stefanie and Irmhild, the family dynamic makes for a slightly different ADU experience. Where most tenants might see main house residents on occasion, Stefanie sees her mother

daily. "Multigenerational living is a beautiful thing and I especially love what it teaches our kids about respect and inclusion," says Stefanie. "But it requires a lot of compassion, patience, and some sacrifices. There are many different needs to consider, and everyone in the family has to feel heard."

Irmhild agrees and advises potential ADU tenants: "Be close to someone in the main house—hopefully they are family."

Even if they're not family, chances are that ADU-living will make them feel so.