



Bill Gall's Toronto laneway house, designed by Christine Lolley and Tom Knezic of Solares Architecture. City approval to built in a laneway - almost impossible to come by now - had already been granted when Mr. Gall bought the vacant lot six years ago.

A home that shows Toronto what laneway living can be

[Dave LeBlanc](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

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You'd think living in the only house on a street would be lonely.

But homeowner Bill Gall is anything but. Look out any window and there are houses all around – it's just that they've got their backsides pointed at him...or their garages.

On top of one garage, the “rickshaw guy” has a big pile of old frames pointing at poor Mr. Gall: “You live in this part of town, you gotta go with the flow,” he says with a chuckle. Actually, he likes the rickshaw frames, since their abstract jumble adds to the jumble of wires, windows and peeling paint in the foreground while, in the background, OCAD University's flying checkerboard jockeys for position with University Avenue's tall brown Bank of Zurich building.

Being an orphan in the big city can come with unusual perks: for one, Mr. Gall got to name his street. And make no mistake, while passersby would most certainly dismiss this as a laneway, Mr. Gall points out that, at 6.1 meters wide, “Orphanage Mews” (the name he picked, but not for the reason you think) squeaks past the city’s six-metre definition of what constitutes a street. So there.

But let’s not be confrontational. After all, this is a friendly house designed by a friendly husband-and-wife team, Christine Lolley and Tom Knezic of Solares Architecture. And for a laneway (sorry) house, it was a lot easier to build than others have been in a city that’s become somewhat confrontational towards new housing in unlikely places.

It was easy because the lot’s previous owner had already waded through the approvals quagmire at city hall and then abandoned the project when Mr. Gall purchased six years ago. After “wrestling” with many ideas of what to place on the as-yet-unnamed lane/street—Mr. Gall is in real estate and knows his stuff—he contacted Solares, a firm known for their commitment to sustainable practices.

“I liked their enthusiasm,” he says, adding, “I didn’t really want a place that looked like a spaceship had landed in the neighbourhood; I wanted something that people would look at and think ‘Is that old, is that new, has it been here for a while?’”

The stocky, two-and-a-half-storey, black-brick home succeeds in blending into Chinatown’s back alleys – it’s got a peaked roof, a section covered with basic metal siding and the windows are smallish like other squat industrial buildings nearby – but getting to that design was difficult because certain aspects of it were already locked in at city hall. For instance, while no one wanted an attached garage, the previously approved structure had included one, so the new design had to as well.

After considerable back-and-forth with city hall, construction finally began in the fall of 2009 with Mr. Gall acting as general contractor. However, suspicions that the soil might be unstable proved correct, says Ms. Lolley: “This was a garbage heap at some time –”

“– apparently it was very common back in the day,” interrupts Mr. Gall. “It would be variations in the grading and they would simply dump all the construction debris in the laneway after building the houses.”

So, 20 steel micropiles (Ms. Lolley calls them “little toothpicks”) were drilled down – some as deep as 48 feet – until they bit into the bedrock. When each of the 1½-inch-thick steel rods had twisted “like a piece of licorice” to reach the required stability, they were encased in concrete. Then, a rebar cage was built around them and the basement’s concrete pad was poured.

“When Bill was building this, no one batted an eye,” says Ms. Lolley. “You’d get these really old people who, in other parts of town, would be, like, ‘What’s going on, I don’t like change’ and these people were saying ‘This is such a good idea, it’s so practical, everyone should do this.’”

Inside is practical too, as the main floor contains only a large kitchen and dining room. The “initial instinct” to squeeze in a living room was avoided because, quips Ms. Lolley, “people are always in the kitchen no matter how small...as much as you try to shoe them off into the living room, they won’t go.”

And while the bright basement has a lovely living room, guest suite/exercise room and a bathroom, it’s the top floor that’s noteworthy: at the top of the stairs is a large study (dubbed the “man-nest”) that connects to the master bedroom via a wide, dressing-room/corridor. In there, a laundry pair sits beside a long counter with a sink and cappuccino maker. Underneath is a bar-fridge for milk or snacks: “This is why I don’t have to go downstairs in the morning,” says Mr. Gall with a hearty laugh.

“We went through a very rigorous sequencing exercise: ‘Okay Bill, you wake up – then what happens?’”

explains Ms. Lolley. "We really wanted to design the house for him and that daily flow."

It fits his flow just as well as it fits the neighbourhood. And the street name is a good fit, too: Toronto's first purpose-built orphanage, built in the 1840s, was nearby (did you think we'd leave you hanging?).

The Green Features of Bill Gall's home

The house, says Christine Lolley, has "all the standard Solares stuff." This includes:

- R30 walls (50 per cent more than code minimum), R50 roof (25 per cent more than code), R20 foundation and under the slab (double the code requirement).*
- It's small: less material went into building it and less energy goes into heating and cooling.*
- It's designed for modification: the study at the top of the stairs can easily be converted into a bedroom and the guest bedroom in the basement can be used as an office, home gym etc.*
- The front faces south to take advantage of passive solar heating in the winter. Thermal blinds prevent overheating in summer.*
- It's heated with a high-efficiency, air-to-air heat pump which also provides cooling in the summer. An HRV (Heat Recovery Ventilator) ensures fresh air supply and stale air exhaust without losing heat in the winter.*
- The steel roof is long lasting, made of recycled content and reflects unwanted heat away from the house.*
- A small, square footprint ensures excellent cross-ventilation and natural lighting: there is rarely a need to turn on lights during the day.*
- Low-flow faucets, dual flush toilets, FSC certified hardwood floors, recycled content tiles.*

-Prepared by Christine Lolley, Solares Architecture

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