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Accessory Dwelling Units — Santa Cruz, California

Cass Calder Smith Architecture

The notion of “granny” or “in-law” units has been around for many years. In many cases, such accessory units take the form of garage conversions, small backyard cottages, or basement apartments where sloping sites permit separate access. Many cities frown on such units; others allow them only in limited circumstances. Few have made them the centerpiece of community development strategy. Nevertheless, three years ago, following a housing-options study, the City of Santa Cruz decided to pursue ADUs aggressively as a way to solve a variety of community-development problems.

The Cass Calder Smith ADU prototype submitted to the 2004 EDRA/*Places* competition is one of several outcomes of this far-reaching ADU initiative. To date, the city has also supported development of six other ADU prototypes; it has published a comprehensive “how-to” development manual; and it has begun a program of loans and grants to assist homeowners build ADUs and hire women contractors. Much of the effort has been underwritten by a \$350,000 state grant.

In selecting the prototype for a planning award the jury deliberated at length about whether the CCS design was broadly applicable to communities across the U.S. While some jurors had doubts on this matter, they all agreed that the idea of an proactive ADU program was long overdue in planning circles. And they agreed that the CCS design was a perfect fit with such a program, since it hinted at the potential of individual designs without being overly restrictive in its specifications.

A Crisis of Affordability

The City of Santa Cruz originated as a regional market center and seasonal beach town at the north end of Monterey Bay, south of San Francisco. Home to a campus of the University of California, it is also a college town. However, since it is largely built out and its policy is to remain compact, with clearly defined boundaries, its housing problems are far more significant than simply a shortage of student apartments. Most significantly, the city’s website notes that only 6.9 percent of Santa Cruz residents can easily afford to buy a median-priced home.

According to the website, “ADUs provide an excellent opportunity to increase the amount of affordable rental housing in the community while providing homeowners with a chance to supplement mortgage payments, thus making their own housing more affordable.” The ADU program was also seen as a way to discourage the proliferation of illegal, poorly constructed ADUs, a source of neighborhood complaints.

The Santa Cruz ADU initiative also follows in the

wake of a 2003 California state law requiring that cities and counties incorporate processes for developing ADUs into their zoning ordinances. Santa Cruz already had an ADU ordinance on the books, says Norman Daly, the city’s Housing Programs Coordinator, so it did not need to develop a new one or accept the state standard. “What we did was tweak our ordinance to provide further incentives.”

To develop its initiative, the city also applied for and received a grant from the Sustainable Communities program of the state Pollution Control Financing Authority. As part of that cooperative agreement, the city will share its ADU research and development free of charge with other California municipalities.

Among the city’s first steps under the grant was to issue a request for qualifications from architects. Meanwhile, it identified typical conditions around the city where ADUs might be developed. It also hired a professional planning consultant, Bruce Race, to facilitate public meetings and coordinate the work of the seven architects selected to design prototype ADUs to meet these conditions (selected from a pool of about thirty who responded to the RFQ).

As a result of this arrangement, the designs present a deliberate variety of styles and configurations. Some are one story, some are two. One is a straight garage conversion; two others are built over an existing garage. One is a garden cottage, another utilizes prefabricated components, and another has a sod roof. Plan sets for all have now been published by the city in a single spiral-bound large-format book.

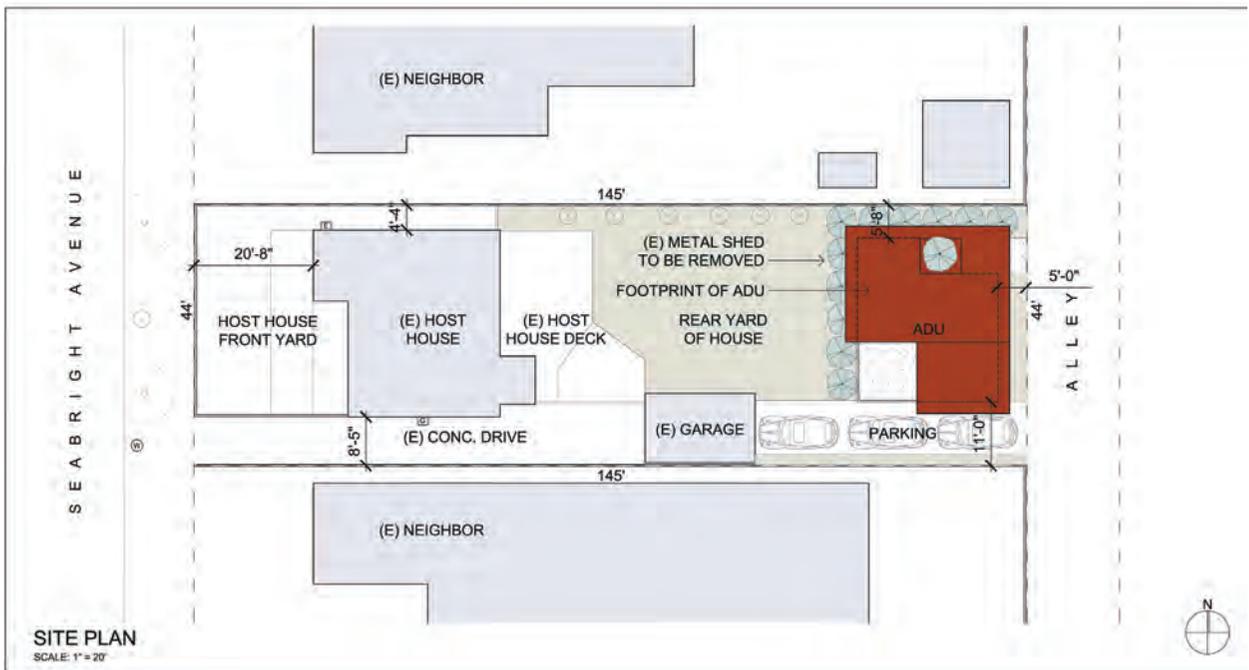
The city initiative also includes a program of low-interest (4.5 percent) loans (up to \$70,000) to homeowners who agree to maintain their units as affordable. Technical assistance grants of up to \$100 are also available to hire building professionals for consultations. Finally, money is set aside to promote the hiring of women construction workers.

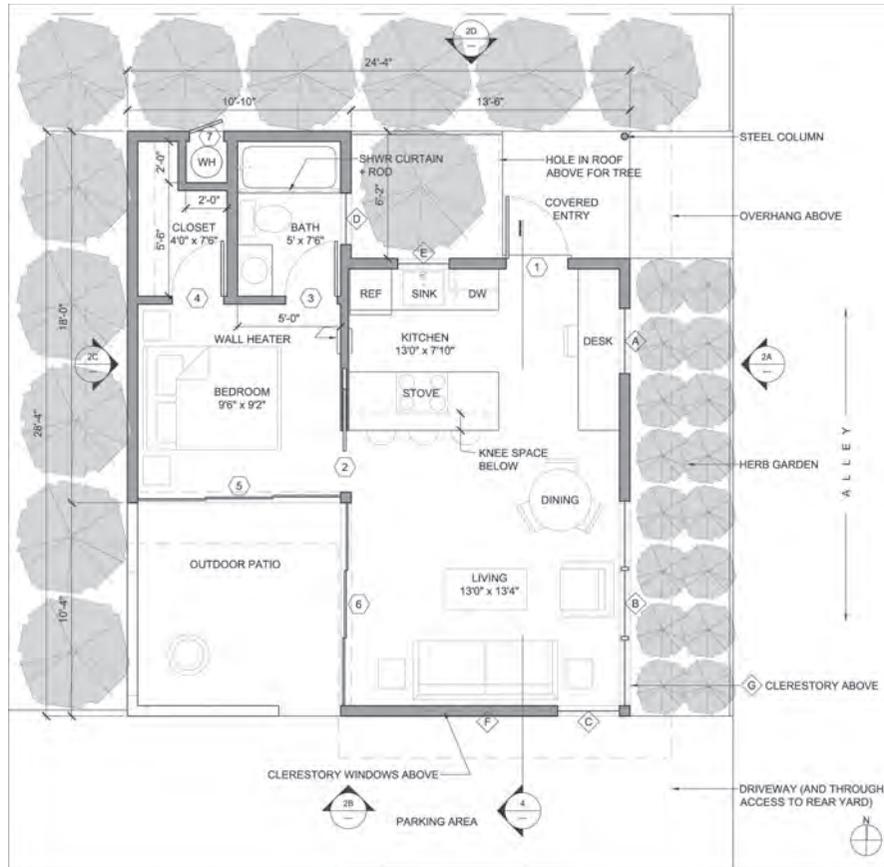
A Strategy of Prototypes

Cass Smith, principal of CCS, worked on his firm’s prototype with Claire Beasley and Aaron Maret. He says the firm was paid a flat fee for what amounted to a “light-weight” permit set — one previewed by a structural engineer and a city building inspector but not yet approved for construction. Since the prototypes were designed with actual sites in mind, in many instances they should require only minor customization, he says.

Of the typical conditions that the city identified in which ADUs might be developed, Smith’s firm was chosen

Opposite: CCS Architecture prototype for an ADU on a Santa Cruz alley. Rendering and site plan.





to work on an alley location. The firm later added a variant to its basic design, called the “eco-ADU” since it incorporated a variety of energy-saving elements.

Eventually, the hope is that the prototype approach will eliminate a great number of the hurdles that homeowners face in building ADUs. And to further promote the program, the city eliminated any requirement that homeowners go through a public hearing before adding an ADU. Currently, any Santa Cruz homeowner who follows the city guidelines can build an ADU “by right” — without being blocked by the city, neighborhood associations, or other property owners.

Of course, there are still a number of basic restrictions in the law. For example, the ordinance requires, rather vaguely, that ADU designs be “compatible” with the design of the main house. A lot also must be at least 5,000 square feet in size.

Beyond this, however, the program does away with several poison pills contained in other cities’ ADU ordinances. Most importantly, even though it requires an additional off-street parking space for the ADU, it allows this to be “in tandem” with that for the main house (i.e., one may be in front of the other in a driveway). It also does away with an existing city requirement for covered parking where the ADU is created by converting an existing detached backyard garage.

Progressive Civic Vision

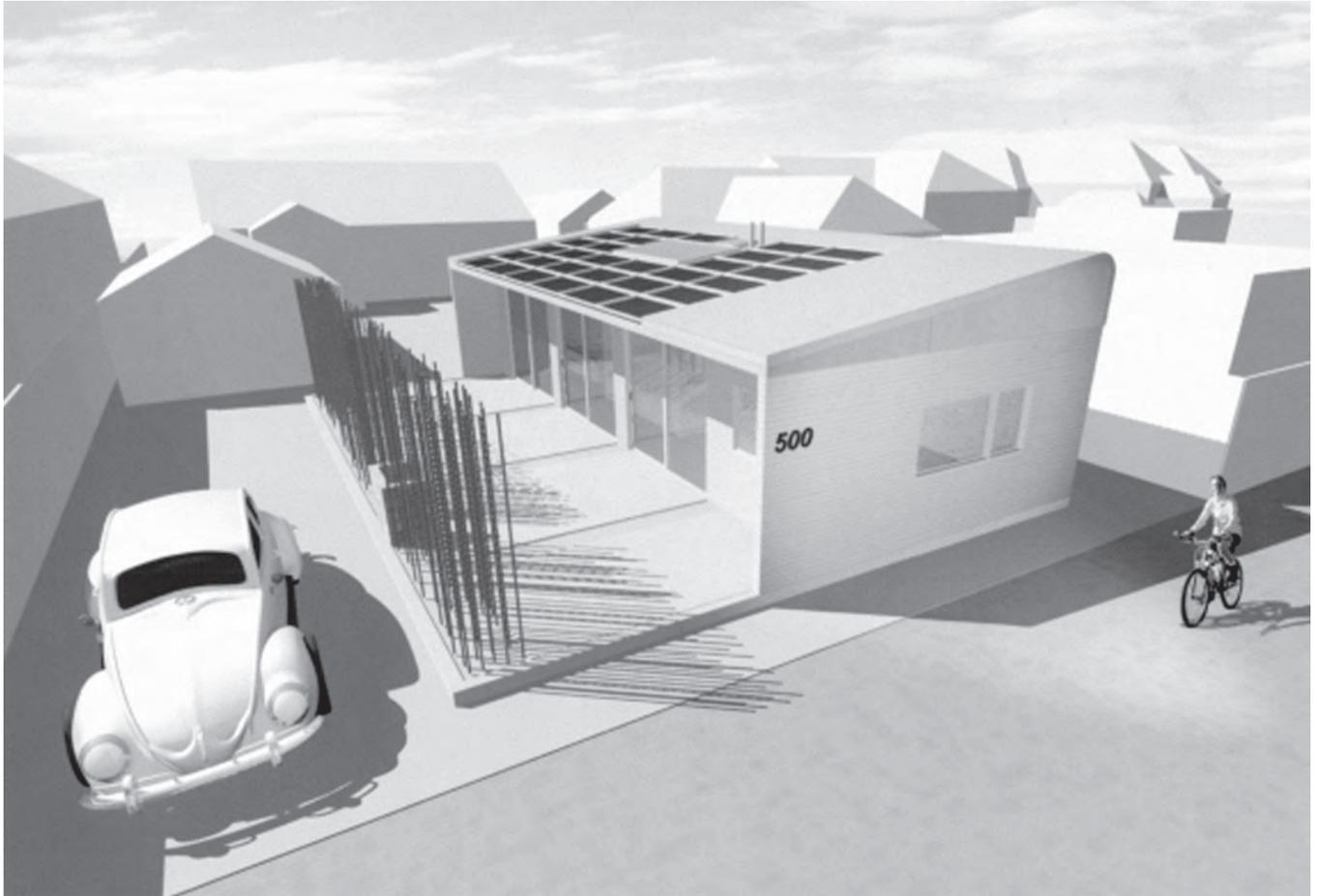
Smith notes there are several aspects of the Santa Cruz

program that have yet to be proved practical. Indeed, if ADUs are truly to be developed as an affordable housing solution, such issues as general construction cost, utility upgrading, and sewer connections may still present challenges. But Smith said it was a pleasure to work for a city with the vision to support an ADU program. As a boy of ten he had lived in Santa Cruz, and he still retained some appreciation for its “beach-town urbanity.”

On the city council the program was championed by Mark Primack, Ed Porter, and Scott Kennedy. Primack, an architect, also contributed a basic garage-conversion prototype pro bono. Other designs came from David Baker and Partners (San Francisco), Boone/Lowe Architects and Planners (Santa Cruz), Peterson Architects (San Francisco), Eve Reynolds Architect (North Hollywood), and SixEight Design (Germany/Santa Cruz). The program was supported by Housing and Community Development Manager Carol Berg and Director of Planning and Community Development Gene Arner.

Daly notes that since the prototypes have been published, the city has received calls from all over the country, and several hundred copies of the plan books have been sold to Santa Cruz homeowners at \$22. The development manual and more information on the program are available at <http://www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us/pl/hcd/ADU/adu.html>.

— David Moffat



JURY COMMENTS

GRATZ This is a very important plan that can get the conversation going. It's a way of adding density in a comfortable way without intruding on a district; a way of giving people the opportunity to stay in their own homes by having the rental property. I thought it was very interesting that one of the prerequisites was that the main house be owner-occupied — it will not be a slum landlord. It's an affordable housing provision for seniors, students, disabled — whatever. It is what every community should be thinking about.

SMITH The other thing I thought was interesting is that it is done in a prototype way. It's not overly specific. The beauty of the design is that it captures your imagination without defining what you have to build.

GASTIL It crosses all three categories. You can define it as a design. They have put it in the planning category. But it could even be defined as research.

SMITH It was not the traditional planning report. It does not say we have to re-create the old-time stuff, or reorganize the streets. It's a very strategic way to increase density within the situation we already have. It's very simple, very sweet, yet it can have a profound impact.

GRATZ And its accessible to the very population it is trying to provoke, which is the homeowner with the space to build ADU.

NASAR I would like to talk a little about limitations. I think the idea that this has broad national application is both accurate and inaccurate. It will apply nationally to places like Santa Cruz, where there are students and a demand for these small kind of housing units, but I don't think it's going to apply necessarily to the affordable housing question.

GRATZ Oh, I disagree completely. This is a design that visualizes a concept that is critical and applicable everywhere — adding a dwelling unit to a single-family house in existing neighborhoods. This is the suggested form. What this does is show a design solution which does it well and modestly on a particular classic-size lot.

SMITH I totally believe that it has that application, but their particular study really

looked only at one typology, the alley.

GRATZ But it focuses on the alley in a way that no one is really doing. Alleys are a very valuable piece of infrastructure that is undervalued and underappreciated. The only limitation here is that they're only finding this as a residential resource when it could also be a live-work place or even a workplace.

TIMBERLAKE I actually think it has universality. And I look at it less as a design than as a plan to provoke. There really is a housing crisis in the United States. What this affords is an opportunity to begin bring of some of this back within the boundaries of existing places. There are not going to be fifteen of them on every block. It's one cog in a wheel of solving the larger problem. The Midwest would be well served by that. Where I grew up the continuation of sprawl is a death knell to some of the core main streets. This is an opportunity to really have some regeneration.

Opposite: Floor plan for ADU prototype.

Above: The Eco ADU variant employs a number of inexpensive building and siting strategies to reduce energy consumption.