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## News

### Hidden In Plain View

**In Toronto's back alleys, there's a whole different city waiting to be discovered**

Last weekend, if you happened to be in the neighbourhood surrounding Trinity Bellwoods Park, you may have noticed the arrows and little houses drawn in chalk every few feet along Dundas West and its bordering side streets. The arrows weren't pointing to the streets, however, but towards the alleyways in between, where over 40 local artists were showing their work in several of the area's many garages.

Aside from the odd bit of graffiti, the city's laneways aren't exactly a place one usually expects to encounter art -- and that's the genius of Alley Jaunt, a community event dreamed up four years ago by local artists Jennifer Bulthuis, Lise Beaudry and Paul McClure. (For a review of the art at Alley Jaunt, see Arts Week, page 51.)

"We had been discussing alternative venues for experiencing art, and out of that conversation, in talking about alleys and garages, we realized there are so many of these spaces that are underused," Beaudry says. "As people who ride bikes, we go through them all the time, but I think usually they're just overlooked."

And, indeed, half the fun of Alley Jaunt is the pleasure of discovering the meandering, dusty paths that run like veins deep inside the Bellwoods neighbourhood's leafy façade. Soaking up the glorious Sunday afternoon sunshine, a friend and I follow the chalk arrows guiding visitors through the alleyways, poking our heads into the 20-odd participating garages.

Normally, we wouldn't even think to cut through the back alleys -- the very phrase has negative enough connotations that most planners, academics and architects prefer the term "laneway." It's often easy to forget that Toronto is full of these crisscrossing paths that are hidden in plain view.

"Laneways were the 19th-century solution to creating density and organizing traffic, delivery, servicing and also mixing social classes," explains local architect Terence Van Elslander. In 2003, Van Elslander and fellow U of T professor Jeffrey Stinson were commissioned to study the potential for laneway housing in the city.

"Our laneways were planned -- they were meant from the beginning to be lived in and used to service neighbourhoods. When my mother talks about her childhood in Depression-era Toronto, she often describes the laneways and the social life of the neighbourhood which occurred in the lane," Van Elslander explains.

Reclaiming the community aspect of laneways is a large part of the Alley Jaunt. Though it was difficult at first to get neighbourhood residents to throw open their garage doors to art installations, in recent years people have been approaching organizers wanting to get involved, Beaudry notes.

"It's not just about reclaiming alleys, but noticing the charm of them. You kind of get lost -- it's a sense of letting yourself get completely disoriented, encouraging people to wander and rediscover their own neighbourhood," she says.

Sure enough, it's mostly area residents -- both the curious and those already out for a stroll -- who've stumbled upon the chalk markings and cloth flags marking the route and are cocking their heads at



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displays like Don Forgay's oddball collection of streetlamps and lighting fixtures or Zanette Singh and Claire Despaire's stark black-and-white paintings hanging in a small garage pristine enough to be a gallery.

But you'd never see a young mom with her kid strapped into a bike seat walk into a gallery, Singh points out, enthusiastically recognizing a woman from last year's Jaunt.

"My favourite part about Alley Jaunt is that it brings out lots of different kinds of people," she says. "People are so happy when they leave and are so interested in what's going on. In a gallery, it's kind of a fashion parade: 'Am I wearing enough black?' But I like the idea of people finding time to walk around in an alleyway and having a rather unique urban experience."

"It's kind of like having a treasure hunt," Despaire chimes in.

Sauntering along the endless rows of garages large and small painted a rainbow of different colours, there's a palpable magic in the many little revelations to be found in the laneways, from the row houses facing out into the alley (Van Elslander and Stinson's 2003 study pointed out that the city historically boasted a fair amount of laneway housing, indicating the potential for further such development) to the very last bit of art we see on our jaunt: a picket fence in the alley between Montrose and Beatrice painted a vivid turquoise and overlaid with hand-cut white vinyl lettering spelling out a stanza of Walt Whitman's poem "To You" in English and Portuguese. (Artist Susan Rowe Harrison explains on her blog that she wanted her exhibit to appeal to the largely Portuguese-speaking neighbourhood.)

When she lived in Ottawa, Vivian Moreau was so taken with the city's alleys she walked through daily en route to classes at Carleton University that she decided to write her master's thesis comparing Toronto and Vancouver's attitudes towards laneways.

"I think alleys represent the darker side of the human psyche," Moreau, now a BC-based journalist, offers. "There's an intimacy there that you can't get on a busy front street. But alleys also contribute to creating community -- people will lean over a back fence and chat more than they would in a front yard."

Moreau points to local cartographer Graeme Parry's weekend bike tours of Toronto alleys (see [www.graemeparry.com](http://www.graemeparry.com)) and events like Alley Jaunt as reminders of the many pathways tucked away in their neighbourhoods.

Moreau's research shows that while Vancouver is primarily concerned with the environmental and aesthetic aspects of laneways, there seems to be a movement in Toronto towards a developmental approach.

But even as an increasing number of planners acknowledge the potential for laneway housing in Toronto as a way to build density and curb sprawl, Van Elslander laments that no concrete progress has been made. Following Van Elslander and Stinson's 2003 report, the city's planning department had created a working group to study laneway housing, but budget constraints put an end to the project.

"Lanes have become less vibrant than their potential," he says. "Perhaps their use is less public than previously. But my observation is that they are still a vital and everyday part of life in Toronto."

In the days following Alley Jaunt, I found myself walking through the back pathways of my own east-end neighbourhood, noticing for the first time the many attractive patios and balconies dotting the area. During the day, kids zoom through on their bikes, while trucks pull in to make deliveries to the many fruit and flower stands. At night, the same laneways are empty and still, but surprisingly not eerie or unsettling. It makes me think of a bit of graffiti I saw scrawled on the side of one of the Bellwoods garages -- it said simply: "Look around."

PHOTOGRAPHY BRIANNA BEACOM

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August 17, 2006 - Volume 15, Issue 46

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