

Berkeley's Backyard Cottages

Accessory Dwelling Unit Factsheet: 1 of 3

In-law units, or Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), are self-contained, smaller living units on the lot of a single-family home. They can be either attached to the primary house, such as an above-the-garage unit or a basement unit, or, as is more typical in Berkeley, an independent cottage or carriage-house. They are an easy way to provide homeowners with flexible space, additional rental income, or a space for elderly family members to remain in a family environment. The concept, often termed "hidden density" or "invisible density," has recently garnered much attention as a simple, unobtrusive way to increase density, one of the most important tools in fighting climate change, while working within the framework of a neighborhood's existing scale and character. However, ADUs are hardly a new idea – indeed, the practice of building a supplementary unit behind the main house has been prevalent in Berkeley and throughout the East Bay for over a century.

Also called "distributed housing," ADUs are a familiar, human-scaled feature of Berkeley's low-rise neighborhoods. During World War II, thousands of ADUs were built throughout the Bay Area to house the influx of workers attracted by the region's burgeoning defense industry. Because ADUs can be quickly constructed without any major infrastructure improvements, many of these units were



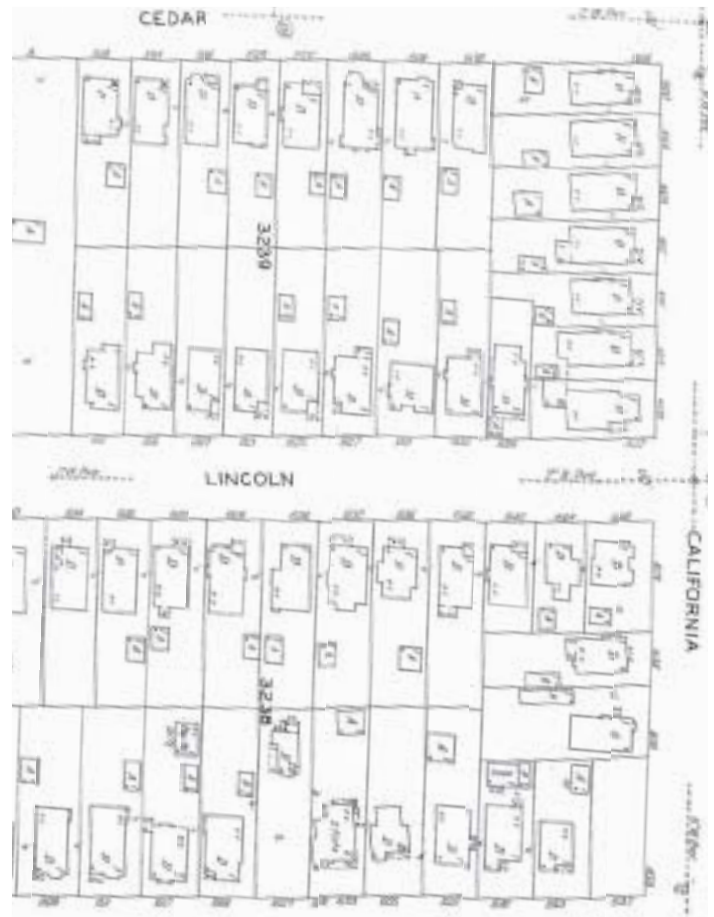
<http://www.homeaway.com/vacation-rental/reviews/p281991>



www.livewithcolor.com/gallery/exterior2.html

A backyard cottage on Berryman Street in North Berkeley.

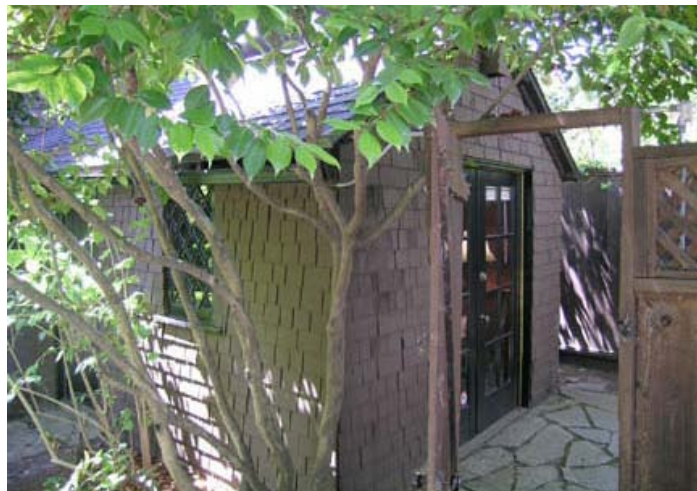
built independently by entrepreneurial homeowners acting under-the-radar.¹ However, ADUs can also be part of grand, architectural gestures. Bernard Maybeck, a Berkeley native and nationally recognized architect in the Arts and Crafts Movement of the early-20th century, designed some backyard cottages as part of his Berkeley residences. In short, the ADUs are as varied as the housing in any of Berkeley's distinct neighborhoods.



This Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from 1929 shows the blocks between Cedar and Virginia Streets in North Berkeley. On some blocks in Berkeley, well over half the lots have backyard structures. Many of these, like the one pictured to the left located on Ventura Ave, were converted from garages or carriage houses to dwelling units during the mid-century wartime economic boom.

But ADUs particularly fit the context of Berkeley's flatlands, with their historically "blue-collar urban form."² These "minimal-bungalow" districts are characterized by neat regularity, uniform land use, and little change – making them ideal for ADU development. Minimal-bungalow districts were built in a form intended to be permanent and formal, with very minor additions until recent years. Developers in the 1910s and 1920s widened the lots from 25 feet to 40 feet, created uniform setbacks, and supplied single backyard garages in order to maintain lower densities in the neighborhood. UC-Berkeley Professor Paul Groth argues that this uniformity was meant to create more predictable land values and erase the visual evidence of class struggle seen in more mixed-use, informal districts by imposing middle class values.³

ADUs provide benefits for both society and individuals. As infill development, they make efficient and "green" use of existing infrastructure and help increase densities to



D. Thompson, www.berkeleyheritage.com/essays/mcgrewh.html

Near Willard Park in Berkeley, the backyard cottage of the historic Gifford McGrew house designed by Bernard Maybeck in 1900.



<http://www.airbnb.com/rooms/43390>

Other ADUs, like this one on Edwards Street, are built or renovated in a basic, contemporary manner. ADUs often incorporate French doors and generous windows to take advantage of landscape settings, and borrow visual space.

"In choosing a permanent home we seek that place above all others which promises abundance of life, stimulus, interests that postpone as long as possible the inevitable apathy of old age. Where do we find this precious boon more abundantly than in Berkeley?"

May L. Cheney, *Berkeley Reporter*, December 1906

levels at which transit becomes viable – yet with lower costs and quicker permitting processes than for larger, multi-family building types. Because ADUs tend to be relatively small, and their amenities modest, they provide more affordable housing options (at less than one-third of the cost of comparable units in multi-family buildings).

Oftentimes these units are the only rental housing available in older, predominantly single-family neighborhoods, making it possible for people from all walks of life to live in the area. ADUs also allow longtime residents to stay in their neighborhood or close to family after they've outgrown the need for a larger house. ADUs are flexible space that can be adjusted to the needs of the homeowner over time: on-site caregiver for children or elderly, independent residence for an adult child getting on their feet, an alternative to institutional living for a grandparent, or a rental unit for additional income to pay the mortgage. No wonder they are just as appropriate for Berkeley in the 21st century as they were in the 19th!



<http://www.gardencottage.net/terms.html>

As this backyard cottage on Virginia Street illustrates, ADUs can still leave plenty of room for gardens and open space.

¹ San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, *Building More Secondary Units: A Painless Way to Increase the Supply of Housing*, April 2001, http://www.spur.org/publications/library/report/secondaryunits_080101

² For more information, see Paul Groth, "Workers' cottage and minimal-bungalow districts in Oakland and Berkeley, California, 1870-1945," *Urban Morphology* (2004) 8, 1:13-25.

³ *Ibid.*, p.23.

