

Back to Toronto's Tiny Town of diminutive houses

Toronto's Tiny Town of diminutive houses

May 08, 2010

Jennifer Wells



Alison Smith and husband Sean Meikle live at 453 Craven, in an area of Toronto's tiniest homes. We've dubbed it Tiny Town. Here Nernei, one of the two cats who share the home, looks down from the loft.

RICK MADONIK/TORONTO STAR

The whole wide world is a tiny town

Full of tiny ideas

With our tiny hearts pumpin' up and down

Come be tiny with me

— David Byrne

It is a storybook day on Craven Road, and Alison Smith is clambering over the gateless white picket fence that contains her eight-by-nine-foot garden.

Smith has a watering can in her hand as she reaches toward the window box of purple and lavender and butter-yellow pansies. The sun is shining, and if the birds started singing in operatic chorus it would come as no surprise.

It is a tiny perfect moment on a tiny perfect street in Tiny Town.

Jack Ridout, real estate agent, calls out a “Hi, how are ya?” with a salesman’s ease, his smile wide, his bearing erect, his graceful mien akin to that of, say, a dance-partner-for-hire on a cruise ship. He has offered a tour of the ’hood, where generations of Ridouts have built houses and sold houses, attended school, volunteered and you name it.

Smith stops, reacting brightly in recognition, and falls quickly into amiable conversation about the history of Craven Road, the epicentre of Tiny Town, dubbed as such by the *Star* in honour of the neighbourhood’s unusual claim. For here lies the city’s highest concentration of detached houses under 500 square feet. As if you need to be told, 500 square feet is small.

Not crazy small. We’re not talking Thimble Hall small, the 120-square-foot diminutive in Youlgreave, Derbyshire, which the Guinness World Records people insist is the smallest detached house in the world, though it is uninhabited and exists as a tourist curiosity and therefore really should not count.

What we are talking about is the best sort of small, teeny cottages, one after the other, lived in and loved, some braced up against more muscular houses, holding fast against the every-home-requires-three-bathrooms-and-a-monster-entertainment-room trend.

“I pretty much know every nook and cranny,” Jack Ridout says. Ridout himself grew up on Gerrard and remembers the white-uniformed matrons at the Eastwood Theatre disciplining rowdy youngsters with a smack from a long-handled flashlight.

Ridout’s mother was born in a little cottage of a house at 407 Craven, when this avenue, which runs north-south seven blocks east of Greenwood, was known as Erie Terrace. He recalls that when he was 8 or 9 or so his mother brought him here. “I have to show you something I was ashamed of,” she said. “There are houses only on one side of the street.”

The homes on Craven Road face west. Across the roadway, a grey board fence marks the backyard boundary of the houses one block over. It’s a distinguishing one-sided feature, putting Craven in charming league with midtown’s Marlborough Place — the city’s “cigarette streets.”

Alison Smith has dug through the archives piecing together the history of her own home here and those to which it is adjacent. She knows her house was built in 1911

by John Broadbent, two years after the city's boundary was dragged east of Greenwood. She knows that in 1912, the house was tenanted by Fredrick Allcroft, a shipper for the Canadian Consolidated Rubber Co., whose neighbours included a driver, a gardener, a glass polisher. And she knows that her house then was valued at \$450.

It is, give or take, 478 square feet, which includes a small extension on the kitchen. The home's original footprint would have been closer to 430. The basement offers a generous enough ceiling height to allow for a bedroom and bath, and from the living room ceiling dangles a trap-door cord, which pulls down a set of stairs that access a sleeping loft.

It is adorably wee.

"We wanted it," recalls Smith of the real estate hunt she and her husband, Sean Meikle, went on four years ago, and the moment the couple first laid eyes on the tiny house in Tiny Town. "I've always lived in small spaces. It's always seemed very appealing."

Making it work requires occasional inspiration and ingenuity. Seating 12 for a Christmastime dinner party, as Smith and Meikle did last December, means hauling living room furniture out to the backyard patio and hauling in two long tables in its place. Here's an insight: you don't need a grand space to host an elegant sit-down dinner featuring braised belly of Berkshire pig, butter-poached scallops and celeriac and apple salad. (Meikle, 40, teaches hospitality and tourism at Danforth Tech. Smith, 34, has finished her Ph.D. in neuroscience.)

It's a lifestyle of living small, driven by the appeal of a compact existence and, for first-time home buyers, the crushing realities of real estate prices in Toronto.

It certainly appears to be a neighbourly street. Eileen Stewart down the way is happy to chat about her move here 17 years ago (she's 72) and the house itself, which has its challenges. "You couldn't swing a cat by the tail in there," she says, standing in her backyard and tossing her carefully tended brown curls toward the tightly organized kitchen.

Then there's the basement, which does not exist. The house was built on timbers. Stewart personally insulated the crawl space underneath in the hopes of warming it up. She opens the trap door to reveal the tunnel she would have had to wriggle through in undertaking that task. "When I first started I was terrified of spiders," she says. "I'm not anymore."

There is no furnace — baseboard heaters only. The bathroom is mighty cold in the winter. “It makes me tough and rugged,” she says of her life as the Jeremiah Johnson of the east end. She recently put in new windows, and there are further upgrades she would like to make. Her wry observation: “The ambition’s there but the money isn’t.”

Alison Smith’s is just one story. Eileen Stewart’s makes two. And, yes, alright, the neighbourhood has shown rougher edges through the years. Stewart says her street was dubbed Crackhead Alley once upon a time. And Alcoholics Row.

She opens her front door onto what one real estate agent boldly refers to as “Craven Estates.” The long grasses in front of the modernized cottage next door are swaying in the spring breeze. One of the neighbourhood feral cats is napping in the afternoon sun. Tiny Town appears to sing. “Come be tiny with me.”