

Cities cleaning, 'greening' urban alleys

By Haya El Nasser, USA TODAY

Cities are starting to see the thousands of miles of alleyways that line the backside of homes and buildings in a new light.

Rather than dismissing them as dark, dank and often dangerous spots used mainly for trash pickup and garage access, they're treating them as valuable real estate that can help the environment and improve city life.

Cities are getting rid of unsightly trash bins and creating things such as gardens and sidewalk cafes to attract people to these long-ignored spaces. In many cities, alleys are being resurfaced with porous materials that can absorb rainwater and reduce runoff.

"The biggest issue with alleys is not what folks are doing to retrofit them but the fact that folks are rediscovering them," says Craig Lewis, principal of the Lawrence Group Town Planners and Architects in Davidson, N.C. "New alleys are used for everything you would imagine."

The "green alley" movement is gaining momentum:

- **Los Angeles.** The city created the Green Alleys Program last December to reduce the runoff of pollutants into the ocean and come up with creative uses.

"There are over 900 miles of alleys in the city of Los Angeles," says Jennifer Wolch, a professor of geography and director of the Center for Sustainable Cities at the University of Southern California. "Mostly, alleys are very underutilized, which can lead to unsavory activities."

Her research inspired the effort. Wolch says alleys can serve multiple purposes, from helping water quality to providing a public space "so people can walk or bike instead of drive, where people can get out and interact with the community."

- **Seattle.** The Clear Alleys Program launched last month bans dumpsters, recycling bins and compost containers (with some exceptions) from alleys in the city's 2-square-mile commercial core.

"We're trying to make downtown more livable," says Tom Gannon, senior planner with Seattle Public Utilities. "The ultimate goal is to have more people use the alleys."

Clear alleys are safer because they're obstacle-free and have fewer places for suspicious characters to hide, Gannon says.

Where will the trash go? In color-coded bags that will be picked up at least three times a day by natural gas-powered trucks.

- **Chicago.** The Green Alley program, part of Mayor Richard Daley's environmental and beautification campaign, began as a pilot in 2006. The goal is to resurface alleys with porous material that can absorb polluted water into the ground rather than having it spill into Lake Michigan. More than 80 of the city's 1,300 alleys have turned green.

In a green alley, polluted water soaks into the ground and is filtered as it runs through stone beds under the surface. The clean water recharges underground basins.

"It's a beautiful poetic solution in a way," says Paula Daniels, public works commissioner for the city of Los Angeles and founder of the Green Streets and Green Alleys efforts.

Urban runoff is the number one source of pollution to oceans, she says, and "this whole region is right on the edge of a beautiful ocean."

There are efforts to turn alleys into gardens and pedestrian malls — a common sight in European cities.

Suzanne Simmons did not wait for the city to take charge of the alley that runs behind her house and eight others on the south side of Los Angeles.

"Cars would go through there. I didn't know if they were selling drugs or what," says Simmons, 67, whose Purrfect Growlings company provides supplies to the Los Angeles Airport Police K-9 Unit. "Nobody wanted to spend too much time there."

She and neighbors gated the alley (something the city no longer allows), set up two Hibachi grills, picnic tables and benches. Baby showers and book club meetings are held there.

"It really invigorates every space we have," Daniels says. "It's not a lost space. It's a living space."

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