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Monthly condensed analyses of crucial real estate and economic issues offered by the UCLA Anderson Forecast and UCLA Ziman Center for Real Estate. Here, Dana Cuff, Director of cityLAB-UCLA, offers thoughtful policy solutions for boosting density in Los Angeles' single-family dwelling neighborhoods

Density Without Dingbats:

L.A.'s Housing Crisis Solutions Are Right In Its Own Backyards

By Dana Cuff, Director, [cityLAB-UCLA](#)

In 1908, Los Angeles became the first city in the United States to create a purely residential zone. Ever since, it has found creative ways to subvert that policy. The city's present affordable housing crisis calls again for redefining the single-family lot by densifying it and expanding the housing base.

As [recent studies](#) from UCLA Ziman Center show, Los Angeles is the most expensive rental market in the country. According to economist Paul Krugman, these conditions have pushed middle-income jobs elsewhere, slowing the region's already sluggish recovery. But what are the alternatives to environmentally unsound sprawl development or politically unacceptable multi-family infill? Can we densify without harming neighborhoods?

Los Angeles has densified before, with mixed results. Courtyard housing, dingbats, and granny flats – all solutions rooted in history – demonstrate the elastic capacity of L.A.'s 457,610 lots currently zoned single-family.

Single-family zoning occurs across the basin, from Beverly Hills to Inglewood, Pacoima to Venice Beach. The component that interests us most fundamentally then is not the house or the exclusive zoning but the lot, and how it has been variously occupied over the last century. This ranges from the beloved courtyard housing of the early 1900s, where detached bungalows encircled a shared open space, to the widely decried "dingbat" of the 1960s, a stucco box with small apartments built over parking stalls abutting the street. These types of housing were built when both parking requirements and intensification of housing on residential lots were less restrictive than at present.

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Residential densification has also occurred on parcels with existing houses. Consider the original DNA of the residential zone. While size varies tremendously, the modal 50 x 150 foot lot contains 7,500 square feet, occupied in the postwar era by a modest house with a footprint of about 1,000 square feet, translating to site coverage of just 13%. The

remaining 87%, minus garage and driveway, left plenty of room for expansion of the original house as well as illegal D-I-Y rental units. cityLAB-UCLA's field surveys suggest that 30% to 65% of all lots in older, low-income L.A. neighborhoods may contain a second housing unit. The decreasing number of vacant lots in existing neighborhoods coupled with a seemingly unlimited market for housing has increased land values, putting pressure on all the remaining idle backyard space.

In the 1960s emerged the dingbat, with up to 12 apartments squeezed onto a single parcel. Unlike the informal backyard transformations, they demolished historic houses, often harmed neighborhood character, and overloaded infrastructure. Negative public reaction to dingbats helped put in place higher parking requirements – generally two cars per dwelling unit—along with front, rear, and side-yard setbacks. These precluded not only the dingbat diagram, but practically any additional units. This essentially froze the house-lot in time and pushed up the cost of residential real estate.

But more recent legislation responded more creatively. In 2004 the City of Los Angeles invented the Small Lot Ordinance to permit a single lot in a multifamily or commercially zoned area to be developed as a set of for-sale or fee-simple homes. And since 1982, California has increased the capacity of the single-family zone by passing laws to encourage second units. In 2003, the Granny Flats bill (AB 1866) allowed cities and counties to permit development of accessory rental units. Although many communities adopted local ordinances to restrict such construction, in 2009 the Los Angeles City Council made new backyard homes legal.

Despite this progress, research at cityLAB-UCLA discovered that significant hurdles to secondary units remain, leading to the following policy recommendations:

1. Reduce parking requirements, particularly in transit zones.
2. Remove building and planning code barriers to backyard homes, particularly the passageway law, alley setbacks, and setbacks between structures on a given site.
3. Expedite the planning approvals for secondary units when an existing house is retained on site.

Because secondary units also fall victim to the complexities of the design and construction process, cityLAB, in collaboration with Kevin Daly Architects (KDA), is generating a prototype infill housing unit. This new model is environmentally innovative, with a simpler delivery system that resembles purchasing a car. As opposed to the development recipe of the dingbat, the backyard house formalizes the informal development practices on lots across Los Angeles. Not all backyards will accommodate a backyard home, but if just 10 percent of L.A.'s single-family parcels built such units, the city would increase its housing stock by 50,000 dwellings. This would go a long way toward addressing the housing-jobs crisis.



Conceptual Rendering by Daly Genik Architects' Prototype backyard housing is almost 10 times more environmentally efficient than conventional home building. It can be assembled like a pop-up tent.

The backyard home offers a host of other advantages as well. It adds units while maintaining a neighborhood's character, with few negative impacts on infrastructure. And there are benefits to family dynamics: Rather than move

away when household circumstances change, elderly homeowners can age in place with a caregiver on the property; empty-nesters can scale down while renting out the primary dwelling; grown children have a semi-independent place to reside; rental income can subsidize mortgage payments in times of need. The guest house, nanny flat, or at-home office all offer advantages. Finally, the neighborhood itself benefits as communities become more walkable, attract more transit, increase local services, and stabilize their populations.

It is past time for Los Angeles to realize housing solutions that are right in its own backyards.