



# DC ADU | Case Study

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**HOUSING VIRGINIA**

INFORM | CONNECT | UNLOCK



**I'm an urban designer at RHI**



**I'm a DC homeowner**



**...and I built a backyard ADU!**





# What's an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)?

- **A secondary living unit** with a separate entrance/exit on a 'single family' zoned parcel
- ADU **placement, size, occupancy, parking requirements, etc. vary across jurisdictions**, and usually exclude 'tiny homes' on wheels
- **Typical ADU Locations:**
  - Within an existing single family house (i.e. **converted basement**)
  - Within or above an existing secondary structure (i.e. **converted garage**)
  - Within a new detached structure (i.e. **backyard apartment/cottage**)

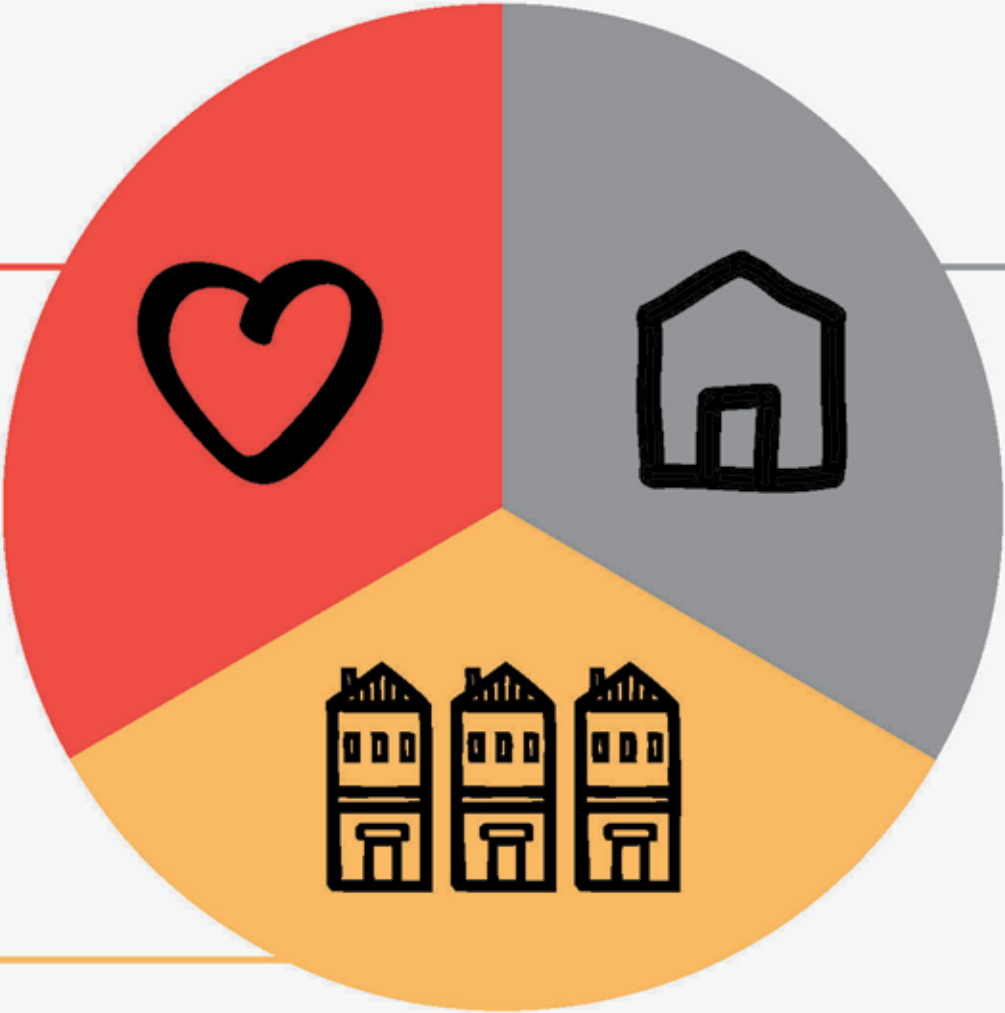


# Why did I build an ADU?

I wanted my retired dad close by

I wanted to build equity in my home

I wanted to combat DC's housing crisis



Was I inspired by my profession? **Definitely!**  
...and DC's by-right ADU zoning? **Of course!**

**But also...**



Home > Accessory Dwelling Units

Accessory Dwelling Units



Living Big In A Tiny House



3.49M subscribers



## Tiny Town, USA

Curbed visits four cities to uncover why the next big thing in American homes is small



PROPERTY LINES

## Why tiny ADUs may be a big answer to the urban housing crisis

10

*How accessory dwelling units, set to expand on the West Coast, present a small but mighty solution to affordability*

By **Patrick Sisson** | Jan 16, 2018, 12:34pm EST

# So my family was on board with this plan?



**Dennis** (my dad)

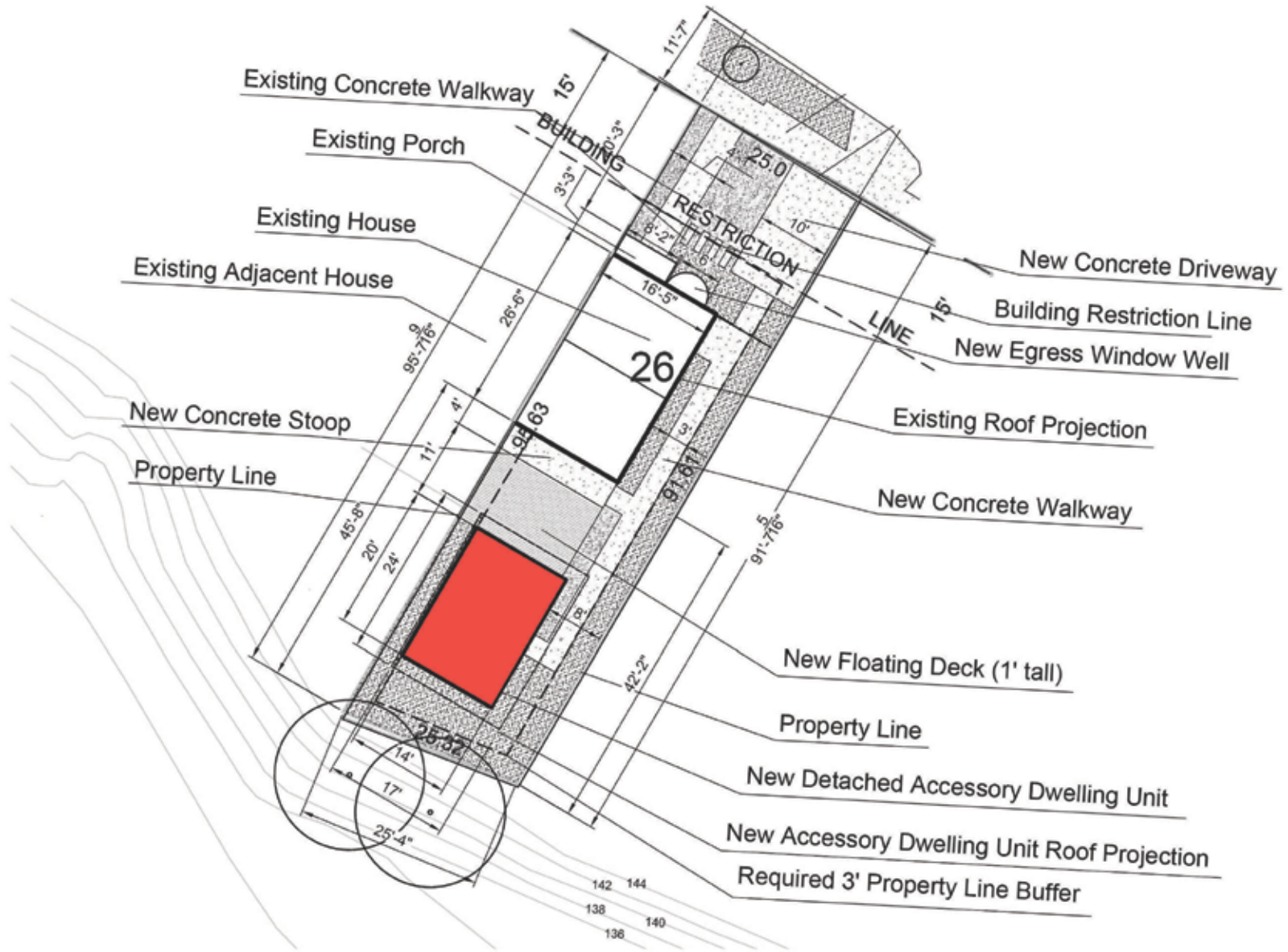
**Jack** (my husband)



# Then I made visits to DCRA... (2018)



# ...Decided to build a 280sf detached unit...





# Made **MORE** visits to DCRA...



# Luckily, after

- 5 months of reviews
- 3 permit revision rounds
- Adding fire sprinklers
- Providing a soil erosion plan
- Additional permits from 2 other agencies
- Lots of permit fees

**...I got my permit! (May 2019)**





# Before Construction





# Construction (May 2019 - December 2019)



# Construction (May 2019 - December 2019)





# Construction (May 2019 - December 2019)





# Construction (May 2019 - December 2019)



# Construction (May 2019 - December 2019)



# Complete interior





# Complete exterior



# My takeaways/insights

01. ADUs work best in **competitive/expensive** single family real estate markets

02. ADUs are well suited for **young adults, singles, retirees, and multi-generational living** arrangements

## Limited ADU experience in the DC region

03. Many building permit reviewers have **never reviewed an ADU application**

04. Most local contractors have **never built a detached new construction ADU**



My ADU has been extremely helpful during the **COVID-19 Pandemic**

- **Facilitates social distancing without creating social isolation**
- **Allows for consolidated errands, etc.**

# Current Hurdles...



## Financing

- Can easily become cost prohibitive, especially considering utility connections, professional fees, etc.



## Permitting

- The process can easily become unpredictable and time consuming, especially for homeowners without building experience



## Unclear Marketing

- What's an ADU? Is it just a tiny house?
- They can also be in basements?
- Why can't I buy one like I would buy a car or RV?
- What's the difference between an ADU and a guest house?
- Can I Airbnb an ADU?



# Conclusions for Virginia Jurisdictions

## Definitely:



### 01 | Allow by-right ADUs

- While not a fix-all solution, ADUs are one of many tools in the affordable housing toolkit



### 02 | Simplify permitting

- ADUs shouldn't be held to the same permitting standards as traditional single family houses

## Consider:



### 03 | Pre-approved designs

- Open-sourced, simple, community-approved plans to provide more predictability to applicants



### 04 | Developer-built ADUs

- Allow developers to build by-right ADUs within new development projects and as part of house flips