

Southside Survey: Alley Houses for South Bethlehem

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Southside Survey is an ongoing research, design, and advocacy project that asks how architects can imagine novel density solutions within historic contexts that are reconciling intense development pressures with the politics of change. Born out of contemporary housing debates in South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, this project proposes a place-specific densification model through the revival of the “Alley House,” a regional housing type common in the 19th century that was effectively outlawed during the mid-century trend of suburbanization and single-family down-zoning.¹

Home to old Moravian Bethlehem (a UNESCO World Heritage List candidate) and the decommissioned Bethlehem Steel factory (now repurposed as Wind Creek Casino), Bethlehem and the Southside in particular have staked their post-industrial economy on heritage tourism.² This preoccupation with history also shapes public discourse on the construction of new housing. In a city with a 3.5 percent residential vacancy rate, a recent developer-driven building boom of over 1,000 new units has been met with widespread community opposition.³ “Too tall” and “doesn’t blend in” are common refrains. Appeals to the ineffable qualities that make the Southside “itself,” framed within the rhetoric of historic preservation, often stall or stop development entirely.



Figure 1. *Five Alley House Design Prototypes*. Author.

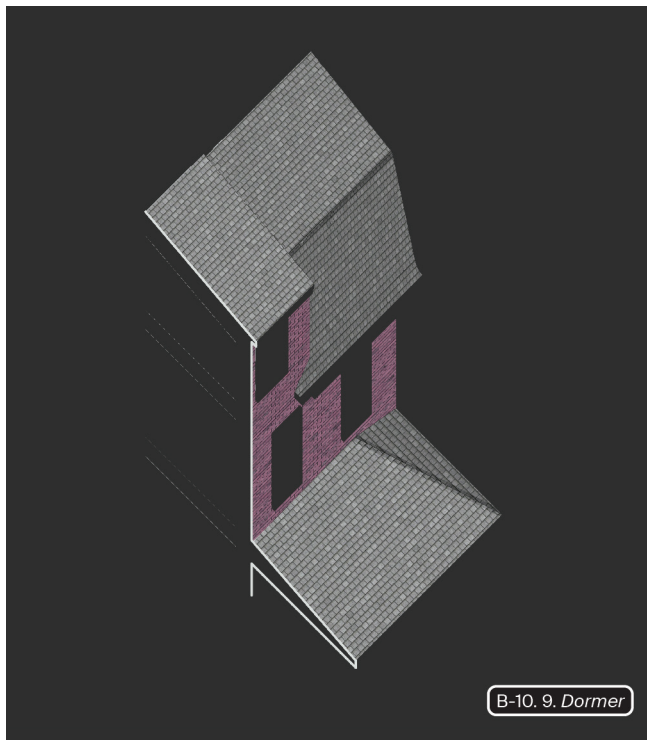


Figure 2. *Field Survey Architectural Detail*. Author.

Southside Survey proposes a density model within this context that mediates between the competing interests of preservation and development. This project works to craft a housing culture that leverages regional building traditions to envision a locally-specific model for accessory dwelling units – the “Alley House.” Found throughout Eastern Pennsylvania, Alley Houses were built on the “back” of occupied parcels to quickly house immigrant workers in rapidly industrializing towns. These improvised homes-on-the-alley were often rented by the homeowner for supplemental income or to accommodate extended family structures. In South Bethlehem specifically, the Alley House was historically instrumental in housing the rapid influx of workers employed by the booming Bethlehem Steel, then the world’s second largest steel manufacturer.

In today’s housing crisis, regulatory change is necessary for new Alley House development to be possible, and any new zoning ordinance must be made legible and accessible for community buy-in. Southside Survey works to catalyze this change by positioning design possibility and architectural knowledge as public assets within a specific community. Carried out through three distinct but related modes of work – including a field survey, speculative design prototypes, and on-the-ground activism – this project advocates for regulatory change while re-imagining the traditional Alley House for contemporary use on the Southside.



Figure 3. *Field Survey Elevations*. Author.



Figure 4. Field Survey Block Study. Author.



Figure 5. *Alley House Prototype, Alley-scape View.* Author.

FIELD SURVEY

Today, existing Alley Houses (built at the turn of the 20th century) occupy roughly twenty percent of residential parcels in South Bethlehem. A field survey examining these Alley Houses on fifteen representative Southside blocks was an important predicate to design proposals and policy advocacy. The survey documents existing land-use patterns, street-facing and alley-facing housing models, and typical architectural details.

Survey methods used are elaborations upon sources like photographers Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and more recently architect Clark Thenaus.⁴ Elevational photographs were taken of typical housing types, and were masked to focus attention on elements that reveal urban organization (material and massing change across a party wall) or hint at specific uses (porches, stoops, and parking). Southside Survey makes a critical departure from these precedents through the manner in which the survey coordinates information across multiple scales – block plans, building elevations, and axonometric details – and then communicates this knowledge to a general audience.

The field survey revealed important differences between South Bethlehem Alley Houses and more well-documented Alley House models in cities like Baltimore⁵ or Washington, DC.⁶ In these cities, Alley Houses are tightly packed row homes fronted by a sidewalk, with stoops mirroring their street-facing counterparts. Southside Alley Houses exhibit a more patchwork development pattern. Here the alley-scape hosts a mix of semi-detached duplexes (Bethlehem's principal housing type), garages, and rowhouses, each with no necessary sidewalk frontage. Concrete parking pads are placed on many of the remaining unoccupied alley-facing parcels. Unlike Baltimore or Washington, these open lots present an opportunity for infill Alley Houses – here proposed as prototypical designs for Bethlehem's native model of accessory dwelling unit.

DESIGN PROTOTYPES

Five prototypical designs for new Southside Alley Houses were developed out of lessons learned in the field survey. Here, comparisons between street-facing and alley-facing houses revealed that programming did not typically change between them. The prototypes were in turn designed without restrictions on square-footage or tenancy, unlike contemporary A.D.U.s, which are often narrowly defined as smaller than a



Figure 6. *Alley House Prototype, Model.* Image credit.



Figure 7. *Alley House Prototype, Exhibition.* Author.



Figure 8. *Southside Survey Public Exhibition.* Author.



Figure 9. Southside Alley House Walking Tours. Author.



Figure 10. Southside Alley House Walking Tour Map. Author.

parcel's principal dwelling. Mirroring the historic use of Alley Houses, these prototypes can accommodate a diversity of family structures – a single parent of three, an intergenerational family aging-in-place, or a group of friends as a chosen family.

Ranging from a studio garage conversion to a four-bedroom house, the prototypes repurpose Southside architectural motifs to position the alley as a place for living today. Conversations with local housing advocates defined two particular design questions of everyday use – parking and outdoor space. As such, special attention was given to re-tuning the frontage and entry sequences of existing Alley Houses, in which the porch of typical street-facing houses is simply thinned to a stoop directly abutting the alley. For each prototype, a typical setback provides an indeterminate open space for parking or gardening, and each prototype is entered from the side through semi-public spaces for socialization.

HOUSING ADVOCACY

The field survey and design prototypes were used as instruments to advocate for the regulatory change and public acceptance to make new Alley House development possible. A pop-up show in May 2022 was an important first step in engaging Bethlehem City Council to consider a new Alley House zoning ordinance. Concurrently, a series of walking tours and public talks are being produced to engage the Southside community through various local organizations.

Through maps and other small publications that accompany these events, the survey and design prototypes continue to be communicated to a general audience. The intent is to raise awareness within the Southside community of the Alley House as a distributed, low-rise density solution for their city – a mode of development that meets the housing demands of today by reclaiming the historic building traditions already present in the community itself.

ENDNOTES

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