

The accessory dwelling unit behind the home of Sonja Batalden (opposite, with her son Isaiah Scharen, her dog, Cosette, and assorted chickens) in Saint Paul, Minnesota, has cheery yellow siding that the entrance appears to carve into. "If the yellow of the siding is the wrapper on the candy, this is kind of like the gooey middle," architect Christopher Strom says about the thermally modified ash lining the entry.

A Minnesotan's desire to build a sense of community close to home inspires a bright accessory dwelling unit partly designed by her son.



Conversation Starter

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Questions about community played an important part in Sonja Batalden's decision to buy her Saint Paul, Minnesota, home. "How can we continue to think differently about how we use space in the city?" the nurse-midwife says she asked herself before purchasing it. "And how can we create different ways of living together?" She thought the home's driveway—shared with one of her best friends, right next door—could serve as a first step in connecting with her neighbors. And its deep yard offered space for her to explore new ideas about home life.

Little did Sonja know how quickly her ideas would take shape. "I closed on the house the week everything shut down because of the pandemic," she says. Soon after, sons Isaiah and Finn Scharen, along

with their partners and many pets, moved home from college. "Suddenly this house—where I was going to live by myself—had five adults, three dogs, six rats, and six chickens," Sonja says with a laugh.

The tight-space situation proved serendipitous. "Isaiah is studying architecture, and his partner, Maura, is in landscape architecture, and they're always looking for a challenge," Sonja says. In this case, it would involve her backyard. "Isaiah and Maura thought, Let's try and design something that fits within the regulations and doesn't require any variances," she explains. "It was almost like a game."

As luck would have it, Isaiah had just upped his design game with an architecture class at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and a summer internship with

the firm headed by one of his professors, architect Christopher Strom. Accessory dwelling unit (ADU) designs by Strom's firm dot the Twin Cities, and Isaiah thought one would be perfect for his mother's yard. (Minneapolis first legalized ADUs in 2014, and Saint Paul followed in 2016.) Sonja hired Strom, and Strom hired Isaiah for another summer to work on the project. Now, Finn lives in Strom and Isaiah's backyard creation.

Because Sonja's home already had a detached garage, the ADU could be completely devoted to living space, and it could be built at the back of the lot, just beyond the flowering pollinator garden, vegetable garden, and chicken coops. Structural insulated panels—which quickly snap together on-site—provide an airtight, >



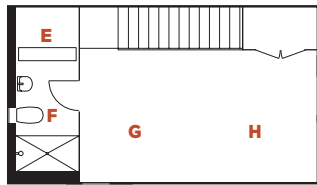
Strom designed the ADU with Isaiah. They went for gray-green Ikea cabinetry that wraps two sides of the room (left and below). “It’s one thing to have a wall of cabinets, but if you can turn it around a corner, it makes it look much more tailored to the space,” Strom says. A bedroom loft is upstairs (bottom left). “The first level is much more connected to the garden and the community, but upstairs, we envisioned it as being a nest where you could get away,” Sonja says.

Sunflower

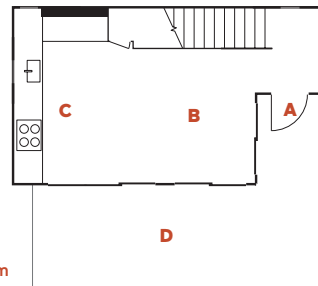


ARCHITECT Christopher Strom Architects
LOCATION Saint Paul, Minnesota

Upper Level



Lower Level



- A Entrance
- B Living Area
- C Kitchen
- D Patio
- E Mechanical Room
- F Bathroom
- G Office
- H Bedroom



“This isn’t just a rental unit or a speculative project to add more living space to the yard. It’s about bringing people together.”

ISAIAH SCHAREN, DESIGNER



continuous seal. Using them also reduced construction waste, a priority for Sonja.

The ADU’s “Monopoly house” shape, as Strom and Isaiah describe it, keeps the design simple and leaves opportunity for creativity. “When you start with that form, you can carve away at it and do things that are a little more unexpected,” Strom says. “For example, you can take a bite out of the Monopoly house to make an entry.”

The entry—which departs from the rest of the exterior’s board-and-batten engineered-wood siding, painted sunflower yellow—is clad with thermally modified ash. “It’s baked to 200 degrees Celsius, which changes the molecular composition

of the wood so it doesn’t absorb moisture and rot,” Strom says. “It’s essentially waterproof wood.”

Color also takes a bit of a break on the 760-square-foot interior, which is primarily painted white. “We were trying to balance the creativity and color of the ADU with the desire for it to have a lot of different lives—to be able to adapt to different people living there,” Isaiah says.

It’s the ADU’s yellow exterior that steals the show. “You can sort of see it from all directions when you’re walking around the block,” Sonja says. “People will say, ‘Oh, you built the yellow house!’ And then they want to hear all about it.” Building community has officially begun. ■