

Good Alleys Make Good Neighbors

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Joe Self



This alley off New York Avenue is cleared near the street but overgrown further along its route. Councilwoman Kelly Allen Gray wants a new ordinance on maintaining alleys. DAVID KENT *STAR-TELEGRAM*

My wife and I walk our alley almost every day to exercise our dogs and ourselves. We exchange greetings with our neighbors as we pass by and we can hear a variety of music, enjoy the aroma of the cookouts and visit with friendly animals through the chain-link fences. We like porches and sidewalks but a neighborhood with alleys offers a host of other ways of enjoying our city and our fellow citizens.

Older neighborhoods that reflect older planning principles often feature alleys as a way to provide access to phone, electrical, gas and sewer connections. These routes were also where service-people might access houses without cluttering the streets and sidewalks with extra traffic.

The utilitarian aspects of alleys are important but the space of the alley can also become a social zone – a place. Some neighborhoods are planned without alleys and so neighbors are set back-to-back. That can be fine for many people but an alley provides a nice buffer zone between backyard activities. The alley is also an informal path from neighbor to neighbor where one can visit without worrying about being completely coiffed and presentable. Gates that let onto alleys can, if the neighborhood relationships are robust, offer access for morning coffee or a shared beer at the end of the day.

Alleys are a great way to experience a neighborhood if they are well kept. This has become a current point of discussion at the city of Fort Worth – see the Star-Telegram article featuring Councilperson Gray

and her effort to bring attention to the alleys of Fort Worth (“Alley mowing a tall concern for Fort Worth councilwoman” – 07 September 2015). The poet Robert Frost observed, “Good fences make good neighbors” and if those boundaries and borders can also be occupied then all the better.

Regardless of who becomes responsible for keeping alleys tidy it’s a good idea to do so. Then the alley can be another place for children to play and socialize away from the hazards of street traffic. Some may think that alleys are dangerous but they don’t have to be if they are well tended since studies have shown that crime is less likely if a space looks cared-for. The design of fences, landscapes and lighting that don’t block-out the alley might actually improve not just the sense of safety but actual well-being.

Cultural commentators like J.B. Jackson and Jane Jacobs have reminded us to value even what seem to be leftover spaces in our cities. But this realization should come with approaches in design, maintenance and socialization so we can fully enjoy otherwise marginal spaces like alleys. A more recent resource is the blog Linden Living Alley by David Winslow that details the history of alleys. Other searches on the internet yield a number of projects and initiatives that explore reinterpreting alleys in our cities.

These ambitious and worthy projects might or might not be right for Fort Worth. But even the most modest attention to your alley, if you have one, might just mean walking the alley, keeping it mowed and gathering the trash that inevitably gathers there. Alleys sometimes get overlooked but these pathways are an important part of our city and they can be part of the way we experience our neighborhood and our neighbors.