

CITY of BOSTON





# ACCESSORY DWELLING UNIT GUIDEBOOK

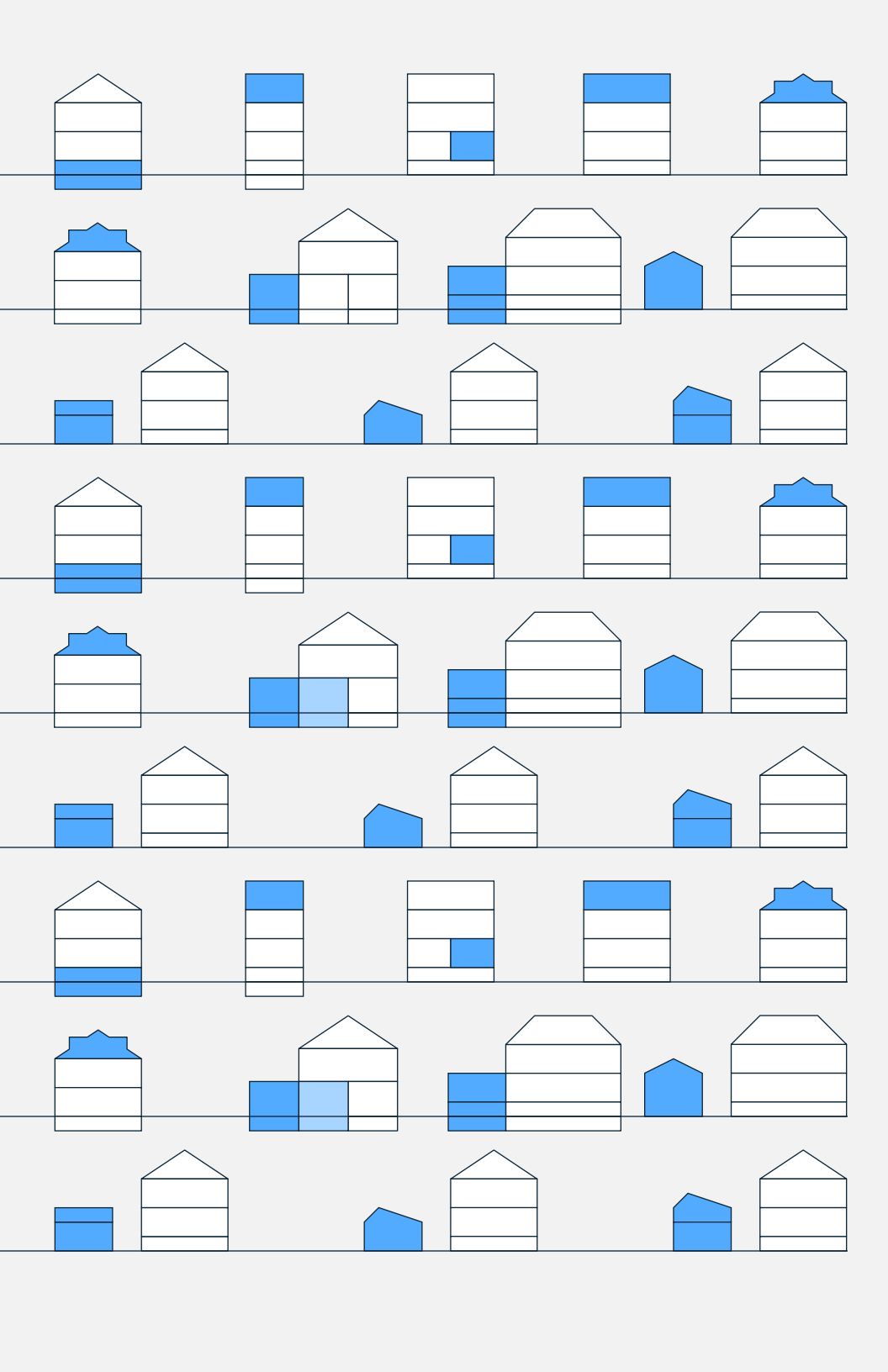
*Planning and designing an accessory  
unit on your property*



Planning Department













**DEAR NEIGHBOR,**

Our work is grounded in the belief that Boston can be a home for everyone — for families of all sizes, across all generations. To make our vision a reality, we are updating Boston's zoning code to make it easier to build more housing and modify homes in ways that keep families together. A critical component of this work involves lowering barriers to building Accessory Dwelling Units or "ADUs."

We've made ADUs as-of-right to build in Mattapan, and, in anticipation of expanding that policy citywide, the City of Boston's Planning Department is releasing this ADU Guidebook. Whether you're creating space for a loved one, renting out for extra income, or downsizing to stay on your property, ADUs create affordable opportunities for our communities to get more out of our existing housing stock.

In these pages, you'll find a range of helpful example ADU designs tailored to the unique character of each of our neighborhoods; practical tips and architectural insights; and relevant resources on regulations, guidelines, and ADU financing. In other words: everything you need to get started as you explore the possibilities ADUs could unlock for you and your family.

Together, we can increase the diversity and supply of Boston's housing stock while preserving the character of our neighborhoods, protecting our green spaces, and making Boston a better home for everyone.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Wu". The script is fluid and cursive.

**MICHELLE WU**  
MAYOR OF BOSTON

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Accessory Dwelling Unit Guidebook is the result of efforts by City of Boston staff and a team of consultants. All accessory dwelling unit designs were designed by Neighbor Architects. SLS Consultants provided input on the designs related to Building Code, Fire Code, and related life safety regulations. Outwith Studio provided urban planning support, and Other Tomorrows provided graphic design services. The City of Boston's Planning Department oversaw the direction and development of the book, individual ADU designs, and additional content throughout. Additional support was provided by the Mayor's Office of Housing and the Inspectional Services Department.

## DISCLAIMER

The information, guidance, and design suggestions provided in this ADU Guidebook are intended for general informational and educational purposes only. While the recommendations aim to assist property owners in navigating Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) design and permitting, they are not legally binding and do not constitute official legal, zoning, or building code advice.

Please consult with qualified professionals, including zoning attorneys, engineers, architects, and licensed contractors, to ensure compliance with current laws and regulations applicable to your property. Neither the City of Boston, its departments, nor the authors of this guidebook assume liability for any actions taken based on the information in this document.



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*History of ADU Zoning in Boston*

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# INTRODUCTION



# WHY AN ADU GUIDEBOOK?

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This guidebook presents a vision for the Boston community to address their housing needs through Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs). The ADU designs presented in the book provide incremental, neighborhood-scale housing that will bring more accessible and lower-cost options to multigenerational families, one- and two-person households, young adults, seniors, and others. These small-scale housing solutions can fit into the existing design of Boston neighborhoods and maximize beauty and functionality for ADU residents and neighbors alike. Bringing these ideas to life will require effort from the City, the community, and professionals in design, engineering, and construction. It will require zoning reform to see ADUs built in any significant number. Ideally, this guidebook, by providing realistic approaches to ADU design in Boston, can inform that public discussion.

This guidebook provides design inspiration to help owners of small residential properties understand what kind of ADU could be right for them and their property, and what they must consider in order to move forward in the design process. To do this, the book provides realistically buildable ADU designs that are paired with common home types present in Boston. In some cases, the guidebook shows options to modify these designs to meet more specific needs a household may have, such as wheelchair accessibility.





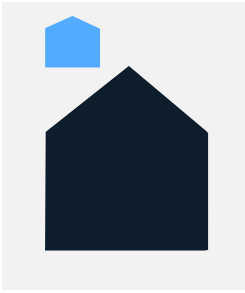
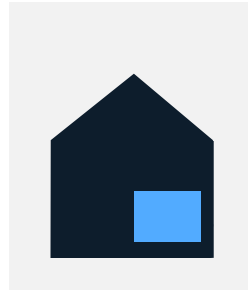
*An accessory building that could provide space for an ADU.*

Every property and existing building is unique, of course, and each property owner has their own design goals. There is no way for the City to match every property with a specific ADU design within a single book. Nonetheless, the guidebook is a useful starting point when learning about ADU design that could be appropriate for your case.

This guidebook does not provide pre-approved plans that can be built on any property in Boston. Proposals for ADU projects inspired by this guidebook's designs will be subject to the same review process required to obtain a building permit. Homeowners pursuing an ADU on their property will need to work with their design professionals and the Zoning Board of Appeal to obtain the approvals necessary for a building permit. This book provides guidance for all involved in the development, review, and approval of ADU proposals.

The Accessory Dwelling Unit Guidebook was developed by the City of Boston Planning Department, with consultation by the Mayor's Office of Housing, the Inspectional Services Department, other key City departments, and with a team of consulting architects and planners. All designs shown in the book were developed by Neighbor Architects.

# WHAT IS AN ACCESSORY DWELLING UNIT?

*Detached**Attached**Internal*

An Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) is a separate, smaller dwelling unit that can be added to a residential property. ADUs can be created by repurposing existing living space, creating new living space from unused areas of the existing home (like a basement or attic), building an addition to an existing home, converting an existing garage, barn or similar, or building a new smaller building on a lot. Often called “granny flats,” or “in-law apartments,” ADUs are sometimes used to support multigenerational families or to provide smaller homes that meet specific needs.

ADUs can be classified by their physical relationship to the primary unit or units, with ADUs described as:

- **Detached:** a building on its own, with its own entrance
- **Attached:** a building that is adjacent to the main building, or a major addition, typically with its own entrance
- **Internal:** a unit that is inside the main building, maybe with a small addition. The entrance is typically located off of a shared entry hall.

Bostonians historically built small accessory homes to facilitate aging in place, multigenerational living, generating extra household income, and making the best use of their space. Though many Boston neighborhoods have a history of building ADUs, the practice dropped off in the 20th century due to government policy, including zoning, that made it difficult to add accessory homes to small-scale properties. In recent years, more and more residents have shown an interest in building new ADUs, and the City of Boston has responded through policy, financial assistance, and legal reform.





*"I'd like to build dormers in my attic so my aging parents can live with me, and help with future childcare needs."*

**MICHAEL • ROXBURY**



*"I'm born and raised in Boston. My mom has been priced out of the city and I would love to build her a detached ADU in my yard so she can age with dignity in the city she has lived in most of her life."*

**VERONICA • HYDE PARK**



*"We want to create an ADU in the basement for students in the family to have their own place."*

**GERRY • ALLSTON-BRIGHTON**

# WHAT IS REQUIRED OF AN ADU?

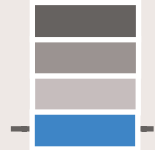
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The Boston Zoning Code defines an accessory dwelling unit as a self-contained, non-transient dwelling unit with its own separate entrance on the same lot as another main residential structure. The minimum requirements of any independent housing unit, including an ADU, are specified by the Building Code and Fire Code, which regulate matters of life and safety. For more information on the applicable regulations, see “ADU Regulations and Guidelines” on page 149.

An ADU must have:

- A full bathroom and kitchen,
- Living areas that meet minimum size regulations,
- Adequate light and ventilation,
- Safe exit routes that are compliant with life safety regulations,
- A design that enables Fire Department access in case of emergency,
- Access to electric and water shut-off valves, and
- In some cases, sprinkler systems in all or part of the building.

ADUs with three or more units will need to adhere to IBC, the International Building Code, which outlines dimensional and programmatic requirements for Efficiency Dwelling Units.



An Efficiency Dwelling Unit for one occupant is required to have a full bathroom, full kitchen and requires a room that is a minimum of 190 square feet. This equates to a unit that will be somewhere around 330 square feet. For each additional occupant, 100 more square feet are required.

Unless it is located in a fully sprinklered building, the ADU will also be required to have two means of egress.



# WHY ADUS?

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Accessory Dwelling Units allow homeowners to utilize their property to its fullest potential and support a household as it changes over the years. Between 2010 and 2030, Boston's population age 60 or older will have increased by 60%. Boston leads the country in economic insecurity, mainly driven by the high cost of housing. ADUs can expand lower-cost housing options, empower residents to build wealth, provide attainable housing options for seniors and young people, and foster diverse, multi-generational living spaces in Boston.

Some common reasons that homeowners choose to build ADUs are:

- To age in place,
- To provide housing and care for a family member,
- To downsize from their existing home,
- To generate extra income with a rental unit (either the ADU or their existing home),
- To house a young adult or recent graduate getting started in their career, and
- To provide more space for family or friends to visit.

The City's goal is to create a permitting pathway for most owner-occupied properties to add an ADU. Adding an ADU increases housing diversity and supply, while also:

- Preserving existing neighborhood patterns such as yards and overall look and feel,
- Protecting green spaces which are vital for stormwater absorption, and
- Preserving mature trees to ensure long-term environmental health.



**MANY REASONS TO BUILD AN ADU**

*Aging in place*



*Provide housing and care for a family member*



*Downsize from an existing home*



*Generate extra income with a rental unit*



*House a young adult or recent graduate getting started in their career*



*Provide more space for family or friends to visit*

# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

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The following section of this guidebook presents 12 ADU designs that are relevant to existing residential properties across Boston. Building an ADU will involve five phases: **learning** about ADUs, **planning** your property's ADU with design and construction professionals, **permitting** that ADU design through the City, **building** the ADU with a contractor, and **moving in**. To learn more about this process, see “How to Build Your ADU” on page 143. This guidebook intends to make the learning phase quicker and easier, and to help move you into the planning phase earlier.

Not every design will be directly applicable to every lot in Boston, but each will provide a useful way of thinking about ADU development at your property. This guidebook will help you visualize the possibilities for ADUs and provide helpful tips and ideas, backed by architectural expertise.

Making the most of this guidebook will involve the following steps:

1. **Think through your ADU Goals.**
  - a. How big of an ADU are you interested in building?  
How many bedrooms and other rooms do you need in your ADU?
    - i. Studio
    - ii. 2 rooms (bedroom + living area)
    - iii. 3 rooms
    - iv. More than 3 rooms

- b. What type of ADU are you interested in?
    - i. Detached: a building on its own
    - ii. Attached: a building with its own entrance that is adjacent to the main building, or a major addition
    - iii. Internal: a unit that is inside the main building, maybe with a small addition
- 2. **Assess your existing property conditions.** Consider your property and the available space that could be used as an ADU by answering these questions:
  - a. How much space do you have on your lot for an ADU?
    - i. Small — my existing house takes up most of the yard
    - ii. Medium — I have a driveway on one side (or a yard as big as a driveway)
    - iii. Large — There's a lot to mow in the front, side, and rear!
  - b. Do you have an unused basement or attic space?
  - c. Do you have a back yard or side yard?
  - d. Do you have an existing garage or accessory structure?
  - e. Are you downsizing? Could some of your existing living space be converted to an ADU?
  - f. Do you plan to renovate your own living space when creating your ADU?
  - g. Will the ADU be used to age in place?
- 3. **Look through potential designs.** Review the designs in this book. Note the ADU designs that are most relevant to your situation based on the questions above and go to each design's section for more information, tips and inspiration. Refer to "CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADUVENTURE" on page 35.
  - a. When reviewing these designs, ignore specific design details like color or materials, and instead focus on the layout of the home and the lot, and how it compares to your own.
  - b. For each design, consider the options that you have to modify the design to address your priorities (such as accessibility, changes to the main unit,



An aerial view of Roslindale.

*“We have an ancient small two-bedroom house and an ADU would dramatically expand our flexibility.”*

**SCOTT** · ROSLINDALE

- sustainability, etc.).
  - c. For each design, consider what you like and do not like.
  - d. Do not hesitate to explore the other ADU designs to think through other approaches to ADUs. Pay special attention to ADU designs for smaller lots, as they could work for medium and larger lots too.
- 4. Prepare for the design process.** When considering an ADU project, there are some steps you can take on your own to prepare — even ahead of hiring an architect. These steps will help you make prudent design decisions, prepare you for financing ADU construction if needed, and make the City permitting process simpler. These steps include:
- a. Talk to a contractor to understand the scale of

- potential costs on your project.
  - b. Determine how big of a project you can afford, based on your own finances.
  - c. Get a survey. You will need a survey or plot plan, which is a precise drawing that shows the legal boundaries of your property and the location of any structures on it.
  - d. Address physical hazards. If your home is older, you may encounter hazardous materials during construction such as asbestos and lead paint. Be sure to discuss and prepare for safe testing and removal of these materials with your builder.
5. Talk to an architect. Engage an architect to discuss your goals and priorities for an ADU, and present your preferred ADU design as well as aspects from other designs that you also like. Discuss what you might like to modify, and decide what elements are most important.



A Dorchester residential street.

*“We have lived here in Ashmont for 39 years. The lot size is over 7,000 sf and one block from the Red Line. I would like to build an ADU so that I may age-in-place (my wife and I are 72), and so that my daughter and son-in-law could be prepared to assist us.”*

**BARRY • DORCHESTER**

# KEY ICONS




This guidebook uses icons that can help readers quickly understand features of each ADU design. The icons and their meanings are as follows:



 DETACHED


 ATTACHED

 INTERNAL

**ADU Type**  
This icon describes whether the ADU is **detached** from the existing main building (a building on its own), is **attached** to the existing main building (a building that is adjacent to the main building, or a major addition and with its own entrance), or is **internal** to the existing main building (a unit that is inside the main building, maybe with a small addition, and typically sharing the same doors to the outside).



LOW MID HIGH

**Complexity**  
The hammer icons rate the complexity of the project as Low Complexity (one hammer), Mid Complexity (two hammers), and High Complexity (three hammers). As complexity increases, the cost of design, engineering, and construction are likely to increase. The true cost and complexity of your project will be determined by working with the architect and builder enlisted to design and build your ADU.

 IBC

 IRC

**Building Code**  
This icon shows whether the given ADU design must use the International Residential Code (IRC) or International Building Code (IBC). IRC applies to homes with one or two units only, and IBC applies to homes with three or more units. Building code is concerned with the life safety of a building itself. In general, the IRC requirements are easier and less expensive to achieve than the IBC requirements. Learn more about the Building Code at “ADU Regulations and Guidelines” on page 149.



**STAIR TO  
ENTRY**



**STAIRS  
WITHIN  
UNIT**



**ACCESSIBLE  
ENTRY**



**ACCESSIBLE  
UNIT**

## Stairs

This icon shows whether entry into the ADU and/or movement within the ADU requires navigating stairs. Stairs are a key factor in design for accessibility, and owners desiring more accessible units should look to designs with no stairs.



**BLDG**



**NONE**



**ADU ONLY**

## Sprinkler Requirements

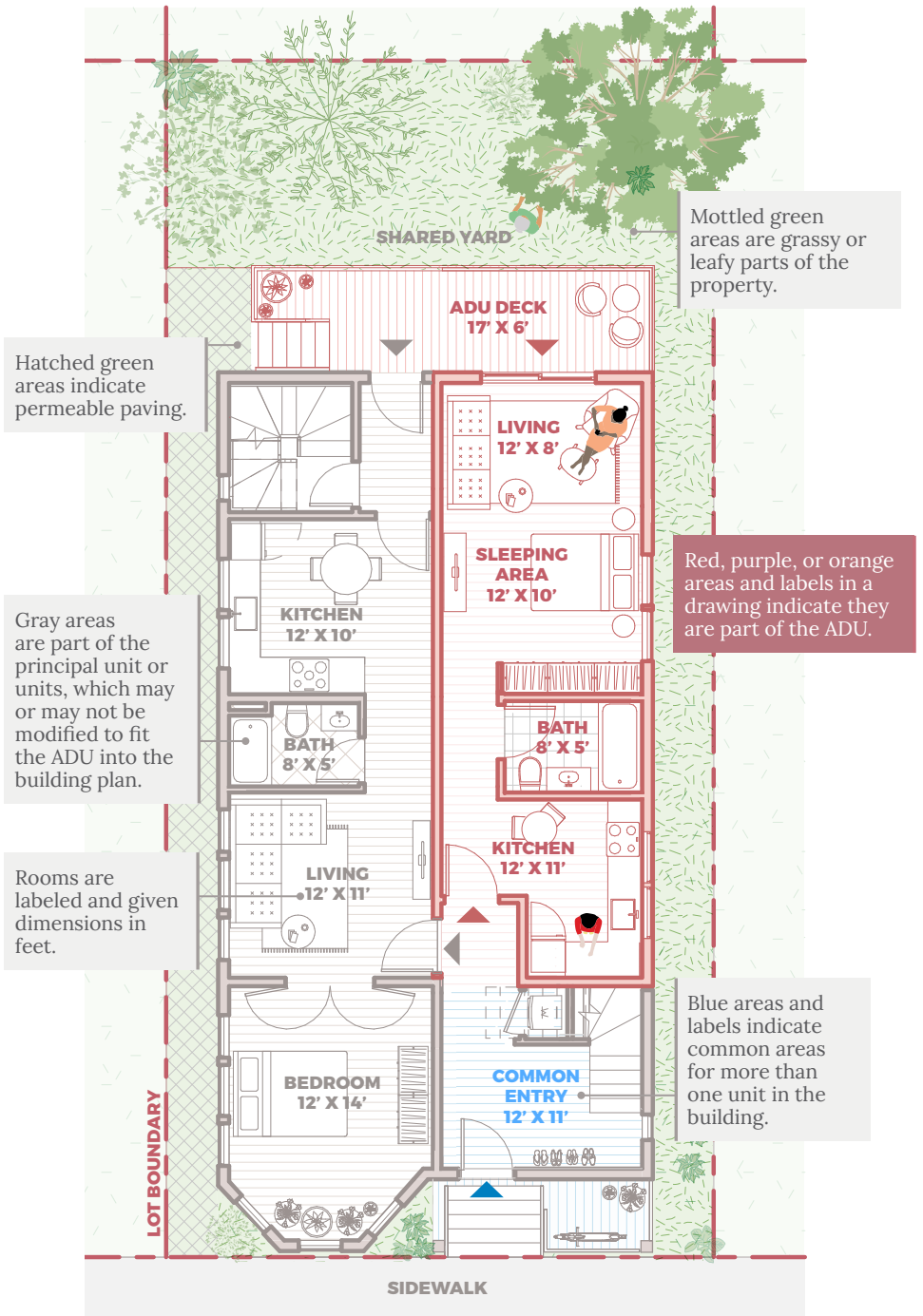
This icon shows whether the Building Code and related regulations would require sprinkler system installation and, if so, whether sprinklers are required in the whole of the property or just the ADU. Sprinkler systems are a significant cost for ADU projects, so understanding what is required can be important for owners. Whether or not they are required may vary depending on the number of units in the building, the nature of egress (building exit) design, distance from the street to the ADU structure, and the amount of frontage the building has. An overview for when and where sprinklers are required is found at “Sprinkler and Fire Access Requirement Checklists” on page 165, but the specific requirements for your property and ADU design must be determined with your architect.

## READING PLANS

This guidebook includes many architectural plans and diagrams. The format of these drawings will be new for some readers.

- Red, orange, or purple blocks, lines, and drawing labels indicate the area is part of the ADU. The colors vary depending on whether the design is on a smaller lot, medium lot, or larger lot.
- Gray blocks, lines, and drawing labels indicate the area is part of the principal unit or units.
- Blue blocks, lines, and drawing labels indicate common areas, like entryways and stairwells.
- Green blocks indicate permeable outdoor areas like yards.
- Triangles indicate the entries/exits for each unit and for the building as a whole.
- At the exterior of the buildings in each drawing, enclosed rectangles indicate a solid wall, while single lines indicate windows.





# GLOSSARY

This book uses a few key technical terms that relate to the construction of ADUs (and housing generally).

## **Principal Building**

A principal building is the structure on a lot that contains the primary use of a lot. For housing, the principal building is the structure that contains the main living areas.

## **Accessory Building**

An accessory building is any structure on a lot that contains uses other than the primary use of a lot. For housing, this often includes a garage or shed for use by the lot's residents.

## **Efficiency Dwelling Unit**

An “efficiency dwelling unit” is the technical definition of a small residential unit within the International Building Code (IBC), a set of regulations focused on life safety. The efficiency dwelling unit regulations are separate from and sometimes different from the Boston Zoning Code's ADU regulations. In many cases, the efficiency dwelling unit regulations will determine how small an ADU can be and what facilities it must include.

## **Gross Square Feet**

The amount of area used by the ADU. This excludes the main unit, common areas, and exterior space. The gross square feet is measured from the exterior face of the ADU wall or thermal envelope and along the centerline of demising walls (walls that separate the ADU from the main unit), if applicable. Gross square feet is useful for owners to understand the general scale and cost of the project, the feel of the ADU relative to their main structure, and the types of households an ADU might accommodate.

## **Demising Walls**

Walls that separate dwelling units from other dwelling units or common space.

### **Means of Egress**

A clear path that allows people to leave a building. The egress includes the part of the building (like a hallway) that leads from the housing unit to the exit, the door or staircase leading outside, and the path that leads from the exit to the street (such as an exterior walkway). Means of egress are important for life safety, are regulated by the Building Code, and impact the sprinkler requirements for an ADU project.

### **Half Story**

A half story is living space within the area under a building's pitched roof and above the uppermost full-height story. Some half stories include dormer windows, which make the half story more livable. For zoning purposes, half stories are defined in Article 2 of the Boston Zoning Code.

### **Public Right of Way**

Any street, avenue, boulevard, road, highway, sidewalk, alley or easement that is owned, leased, or controlled by a governmental entity.

### **Yards**

A yard is the area of a property between the structure and the property line. On a typical rectangular lot residential property, the front yard is the area between the front of the principal building (home) and the lot line on the main (addressed) street. The rear yard is the area between the back of the principal building and the lot line farthest from the main (addressed) street, which may abut other property lines or an alley. The side yards are typically the areas between the sides of the principal building and the lot lines perpendicular to the front parcel line. Rear and side yards may contain accessory buildings, like a garage or shed. While this breakdown of front, rear, and side yards are typical, homes on corner lots or with non-rectangular lot shapes may have to define their yards differently for the purposes of zoning.





# 12 ADU DESIGNS



# HOW MUCH SPACE DO YOU HAVE ON YOUR LOT FOR AN ADU?

The 12 ADU designs featured in this chapter are designed to work well with **Smaller, Medium and Larger** lot sizes that are typical in Boston. You can use [Boston's zoning viewer](#) to find out the size of your lot. Designs for Smaller lots will typically work on any Medium and Larger lots.



**Smaller Lots**



**Medium Lots**



**Larger Lots**

### **Smaller Lots**

#### ***My existing house takes up most of the yard.***

- Examples include rowhouses and buildings that tend to have little to no side yard and small front yards, but may have space in a deeper rear yard.
- Lot is generally narrow at 40 feet wide or less (where it faces the street).
- There is little to no side yard on both sides (generally less than ten feet).
- There is likely only one building on the lot.

### **Medium Lots**

#### ***I have a mid-sized yard or driveway.***

- Examples include properties with space to add a small addition or with room for a small additional building.
- Lot width is 40-60 feet.
- Backyards are typically at least 20 feet deep.
- Side yards are typically 5-15 feet wide and sometimes include a driveway.
- A corner lot or alley access gives more flexibility.
- Lot might have an existing accessory building like a small garage or shed.

### **Larger Lots**

#### ***There's a lot to mow in the front, side, and rear yard!***

- Examples include homes on large lots or properties with large backyards.
- Lot width is 60 feet or more.
- The front yard is typically 10 feet deep or more.
- Lot may have an existing small garage or carriage house that can be converted to an ADU.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADUVENTURE

1. How much space do you have on your lot for an ADU?

2. How many bedrooms do you want in your ADU?

SMALLER LOTS

My existing house takes up most of the yard.

STUDIO OR 1 BEDROOM

1 OR 2 BEDROOMS

2 OR 3 BEDROOMS

MEDIUM LOTS

I have a mid-sized yard or driveway.

1 OR 2 BEDROOMS

2 OR 3 BEDROOMS

LARGER LOTS

There's a lot to mow in the front, side, and rear yard!

1 OR 2 BEDROOMS

2 OR 3 BEDROOMS



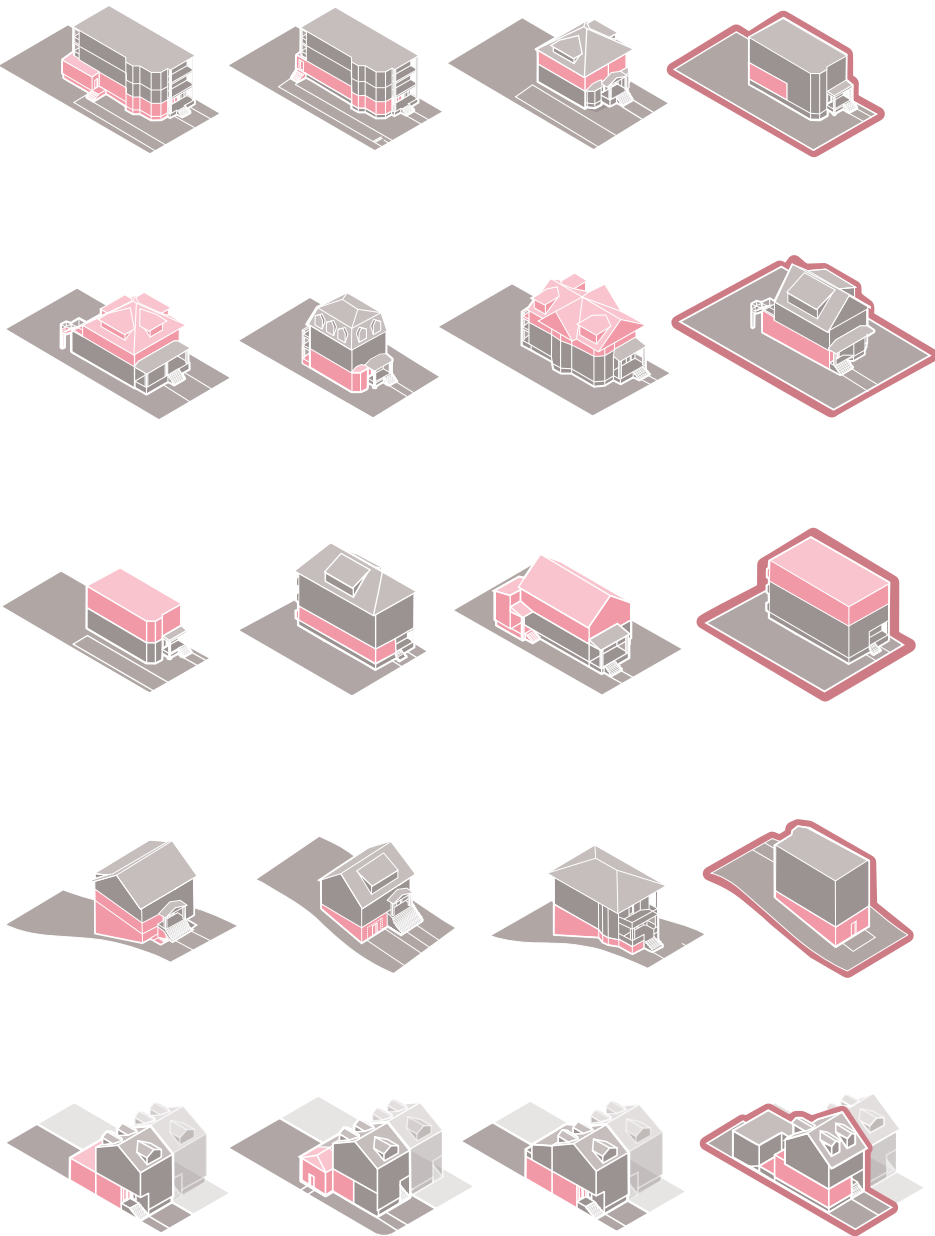
	<b>SPLIT YOUR UNIT</b>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>p. 41</i>
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# SMALLER LOTS

*Smaller lots are those where your existing house takes up most of the yard. There may not even be a driveway on the side.*





## SPLIT YOUR UNIT

41

*My lot is small, there is limited space in my home to add an ADU, and I only need a studio or one-bedroom ADU.*

## CONVERT YOUR ATTIC

47

*I have a home with an unfinished attic. I may add an ADU with just one or two bedrooms.*

## ADD ANOTHER FLOOR

55

*My lot is small, my home is short, and I want to add an ADU with at least two bedrooms.*

## CONVERT YOUR BASEMENT

61

*I have an unfinished basement that has room for an ADU with good-sized windows on at least one side, and my property is not in a flood-prone area.*

## EXTEND INTO THE REAR YARD

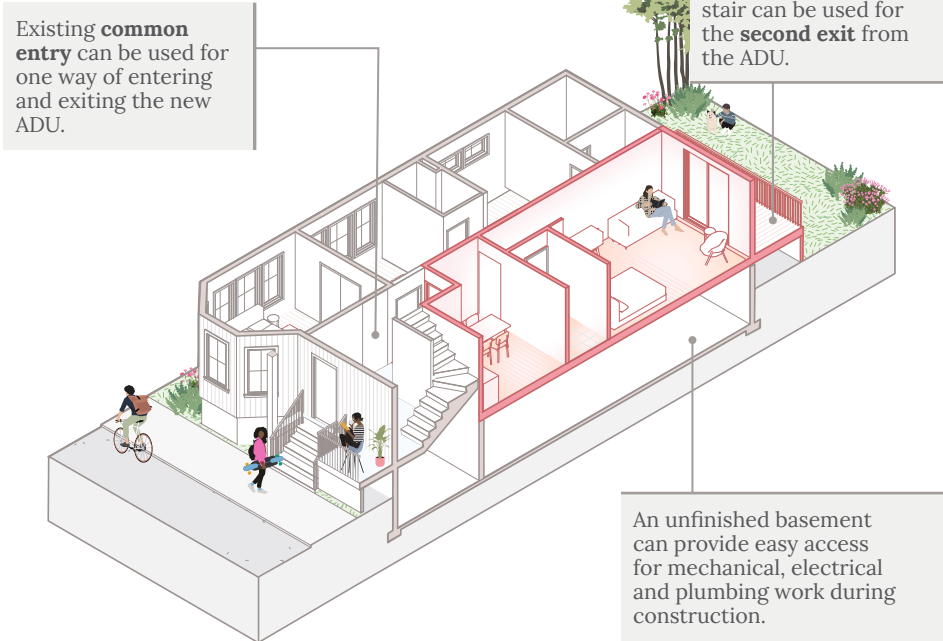
67

*My lot is small, with little to no space on the sides, but has a deep backyard.*

# SPLIT YOUR UNIT

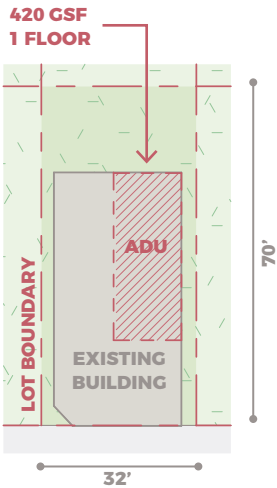


Turn a unit that is larger than you need into a main unit and an ADU.



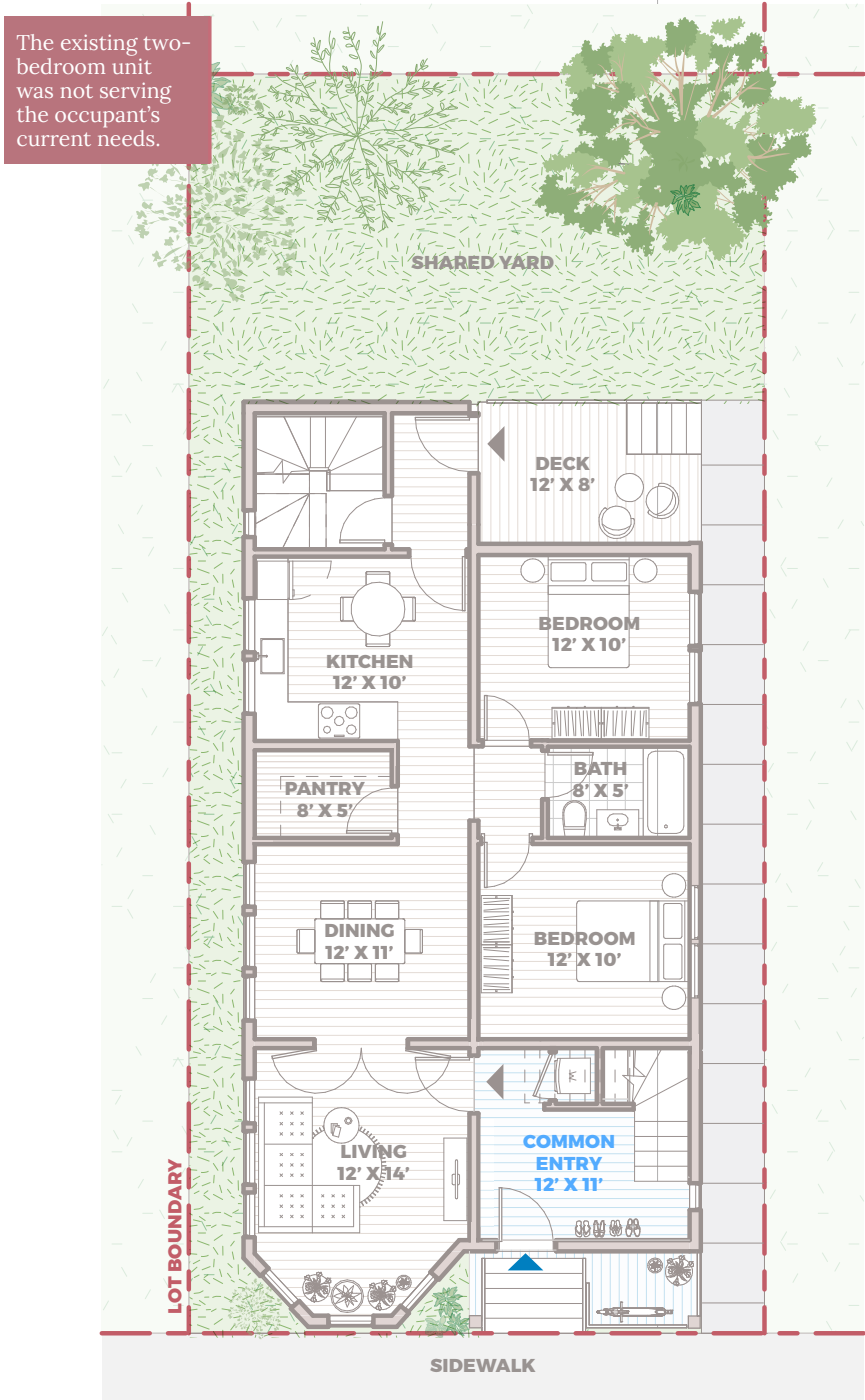
If your unit is too large for your household now, you can split it, converting the extra space into an ADU. A two- or three-bedroom unit can become two smaller units: a one-bedroom unit and a studio ADU for instance. The ADU could be used to host a family member with more privacy, be rented out for income, or be home to a live-in caregiver. This scheme is designed to work well with the typical two- and three-unit houses found throughout Boston, which usually have one two- or three-bedroom unit on each floor.

If the building features an unfinished basement and the new ADU is on the first floor, plumbing and electrical updates can be done in the basement without disturbing units above the ADU.





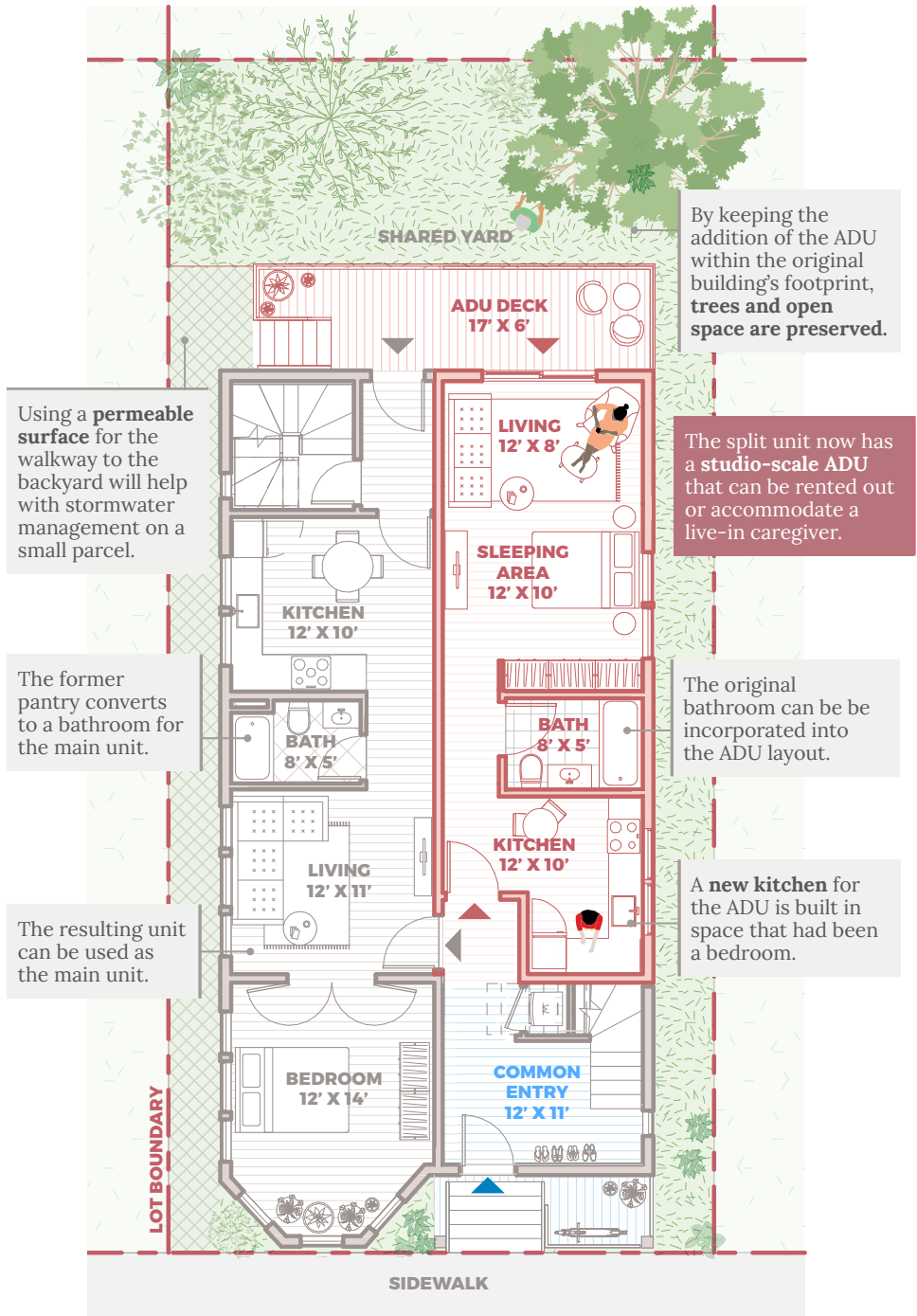




ORIGINAL FLOOR PLAN WITH 2 BEDROOM UNIT

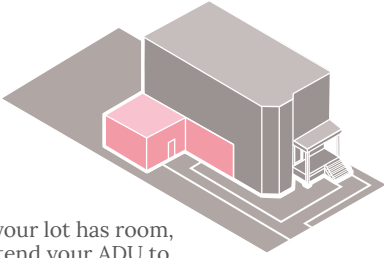
3/32" = 1'-0"



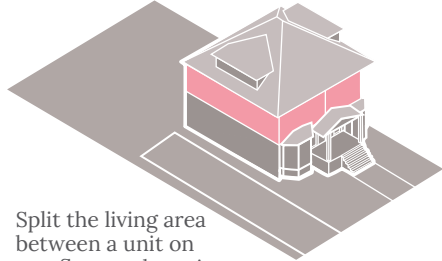


# MORE WAYS TO SPLIT YOUR UNIT

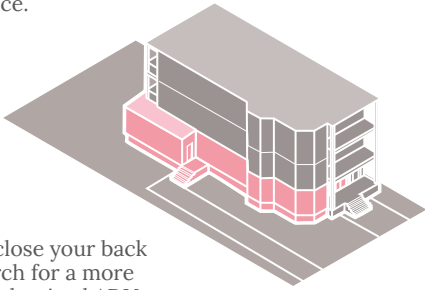
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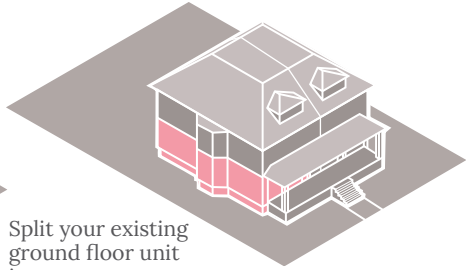
If your lot has room, extend your ADU to the side for additional space.



Split the living area between a unit on one floor and a unit above.



Enclose your back porch for a more ample-sized ADU.



Split your existing ground floor unit into two.

**Different versions of this ADU can be adapted to fit your specific building and lot.** If you have ample space in the backyard, you could accommodate a larger ADU by enclosing the back porch, therefore increasing the available area for the new unit. Alternatively, if you have a larger side yard, you might consider adding a side extension on the first floor, which would provide additional room for a one- or two-bedroom ADU.

The example used for the book illustrates an ADU designed for a typical two- or three-unit house. The concept of splitting your unit can also be applied to other types of buildings. For wider building types, for example, splitting your unit to create an ADU could yield a more spacious design for your ADU. In these cases you could also choose to create a different entrance on the front for the new unit. There are many examples of side-by-side duplexes in Boston that can serve as an inspiration.

The Split Your Unit design shown on the previous spreads is designed to work well with classic stacked duplex and triplex buildings like this example found in Boston's Allston neighborhood.



An existing semi-detached home could also split their living space between a unit on the first floor and a unit on the second floor. In most cases, this would require the addition of a second means of egress for the second floor unit, similar to this historic example found in Somerville.



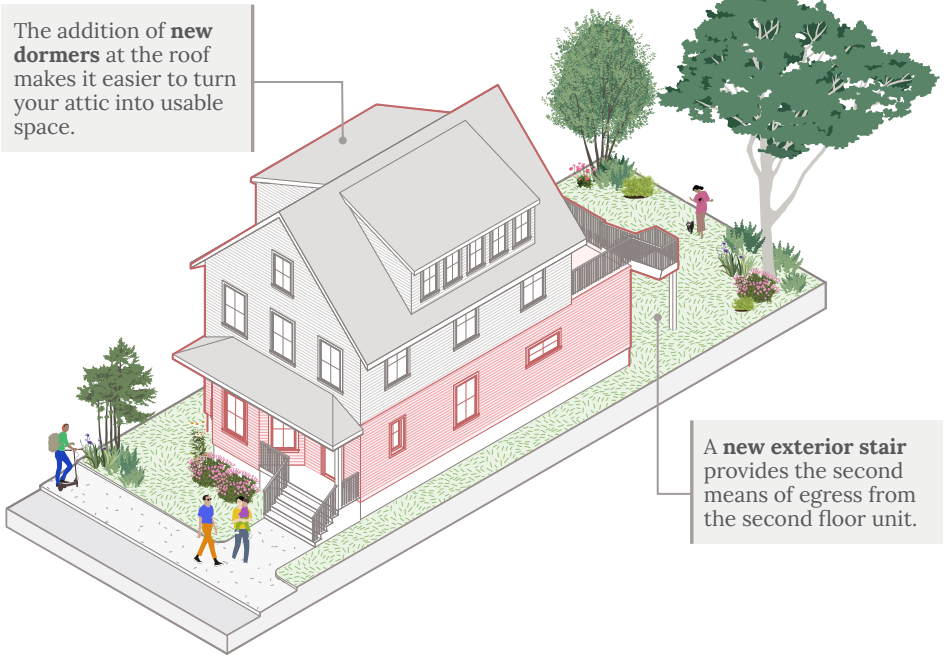
If your home is wider than usual, like this precedent in Mattapan, then you may consider splitting it and providing a separate entry door for the ADU.



# CONVERT YOUR ATTIC

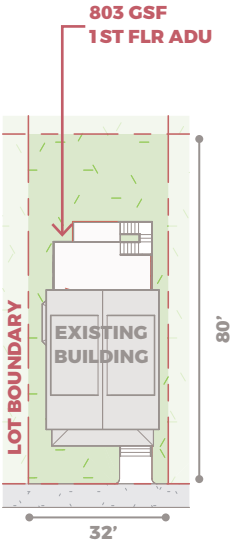


Design interventions like new dormers and new stairs can turn your attic from storage space into a new ADU, or expand your main unit so you can turn the ground floor into an ADU.



If you have an unfinished attic, you can convert it into livable space, which allows you to create an internal ADU. In this example, the attic space is added to the main unit, and the first floor is converted into the ADU.

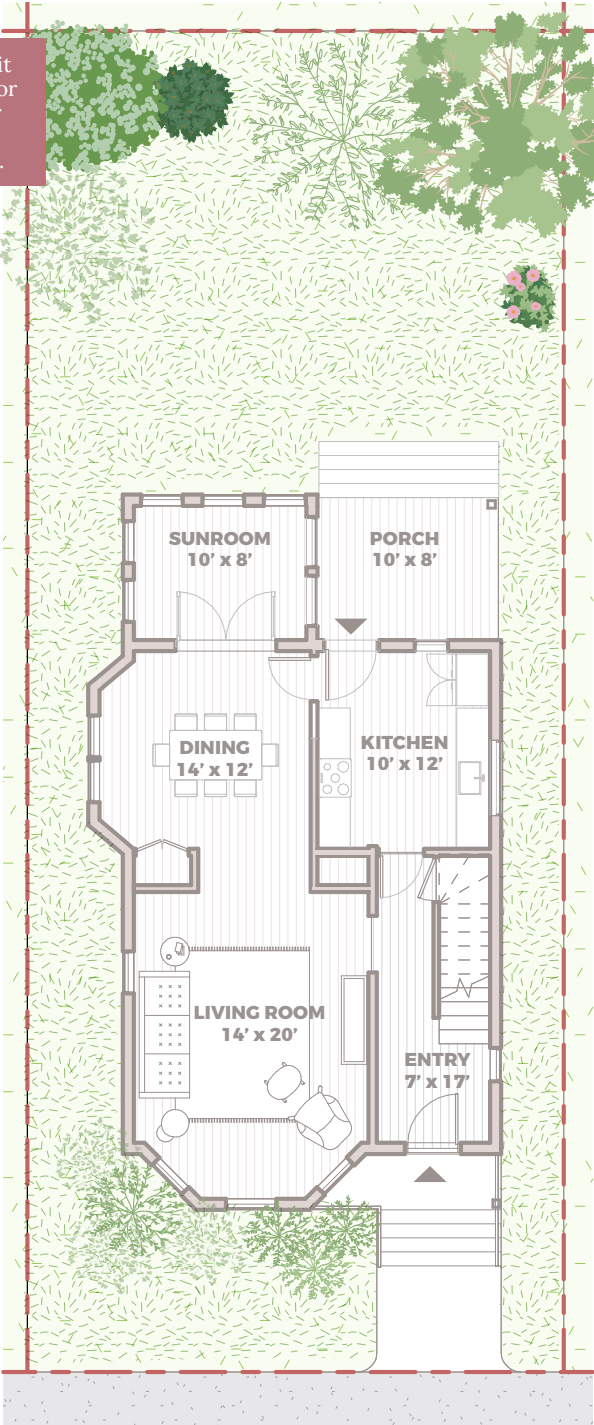
Dormers are designed to preserve the original building's peak roofline, while also creating new living space and windows on the top floor. All units, including the ADU, share a common entrance and have access to shared utilities in the basement. Typically, a second stair will be needed to provide a second means of egress from the upper unit.







The existing unit is now too big for the homeowner and the attic is underutilized.



ORIGINAL FIRST FLOOR PLAN — SINGLE UNIT HOME

3/32" = 1'-0"

By creating livable space in the attic, the homeowner now has two units. One could be for them to live in and the other could be for a tenant or a family member.

In this example, the **whole first floor** of the building **becomes an ADU**.

Existing trees are preserved.

New exterior egress stair added for upper unit.

Sunroom is converted to second ADU bedroom.

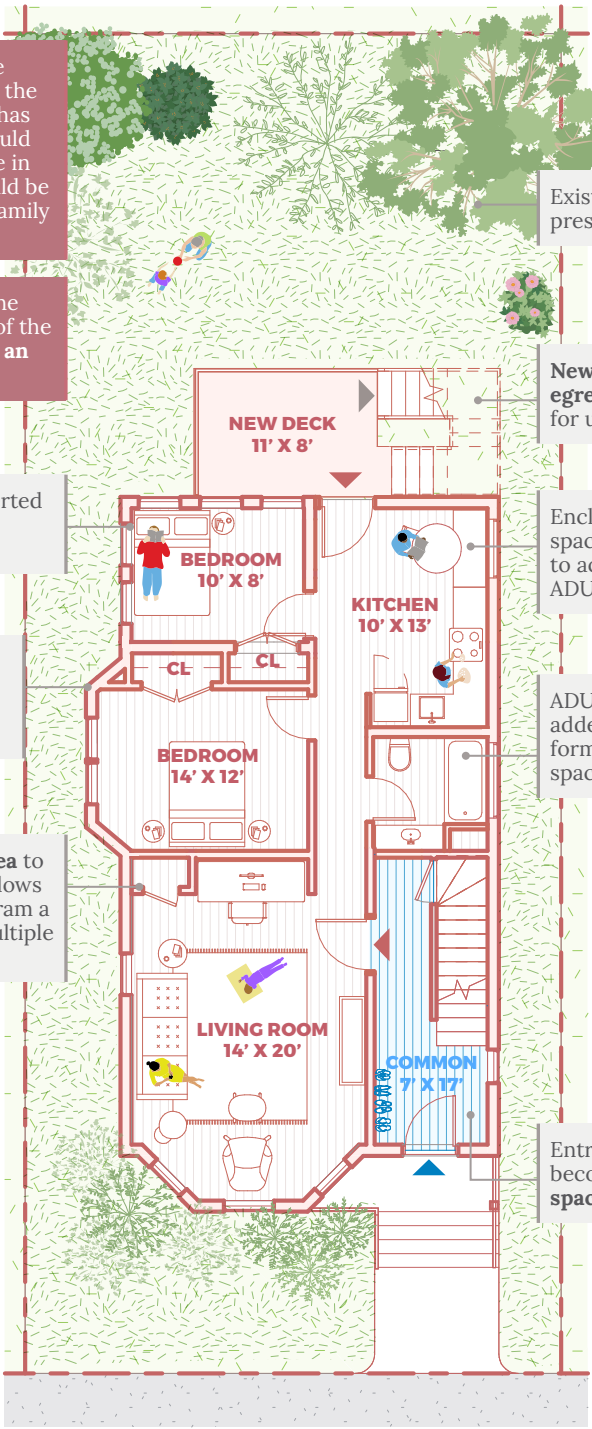
Enclosed porch space can be used to accommodate ADU kitchen.

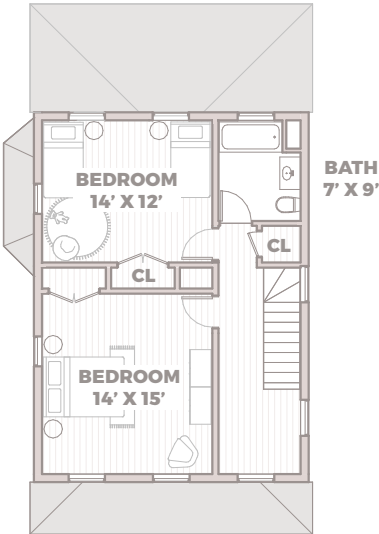
Dining room is converted to a bedroom in the ADU.

ADU bathroom added in part of former kitchen space.

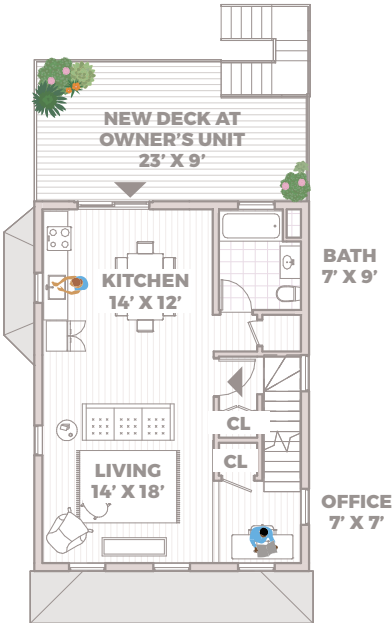
Adding a **work area** to the living room allows residents to program a large room for multiple uses.

Entry hall becomes **common space**.



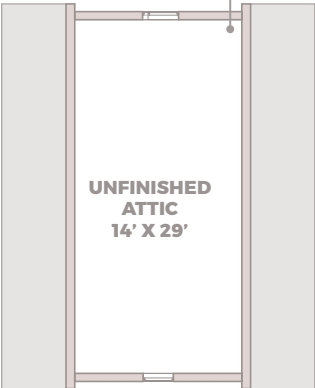


SECOND FLOOR  
ORIGINAL FLOOR PLAN



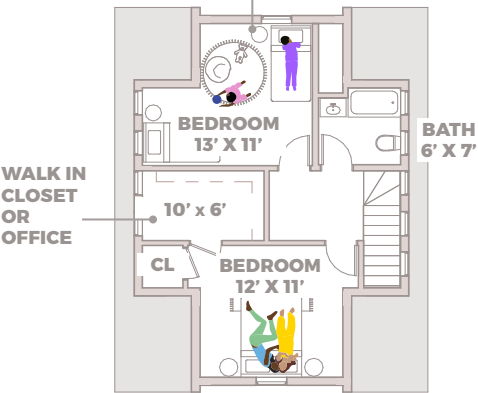
SECOND FLOOR  
REVISED (MAIN UNIT)

The unfinished attic was underutilized storage space.



THIRD FLOOR  
ORIGINAL FLOOR PLAN

The homeowner now has a two-story unit with two bedrooms and two bathrooms above an ADU.



THIRD FLOOR  
REVISED (MAIN UNIT)



**New dormers**  
added to create  
additional light  
and headroom  
for the third floor  
living space.

Stairs between  
levels 2 and 3 are  
internal to the  
owner's unit.

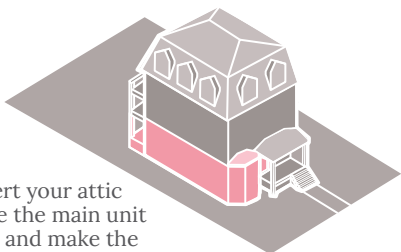


Basement can be common  
space or designated to a  
specific unit.

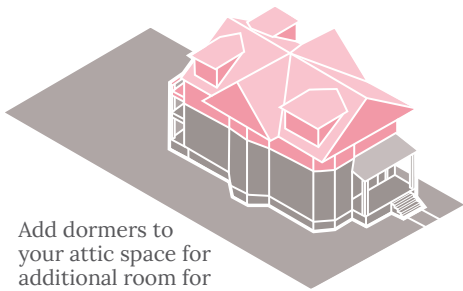
Front hall  
becomes **common**  
entry.

# MORE WAYS TO CONVERT YOUR ATTIC

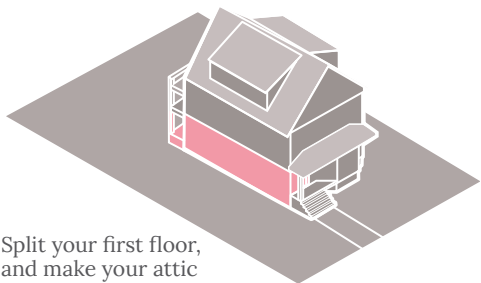
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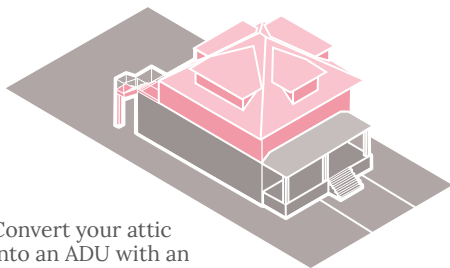
Convert your attic to give the main unit room, and make the first floor an ADU.



Add dormers to your attic space for additional room for an ADU.



Split your first floor, and make your attic usable living space.



Convert your attic into an ADU with an exterior stair.

**The design shown on the previous spreads illustrates the ADU on the first floor and the main unit above. Alternatively, you could convert your attic into an ADU while keeping the original first and second floors as the main unit.** To implement this, your architect would need to design in two means of egress from the attic that are separate from the stair within the first and second floor main unit.

There are several ways to alter your home's roof or add dormers that can increase habitable space and access to natural light. Additionally, depending on local zoning regulations and the maximum allowable height, you might be able to convert your attic from a half-story (pitched roof) into a full story with a flat roof. This would significantly increase the space available for an ADU on the top floor.

This house in Allston has existing, gabled dormers.



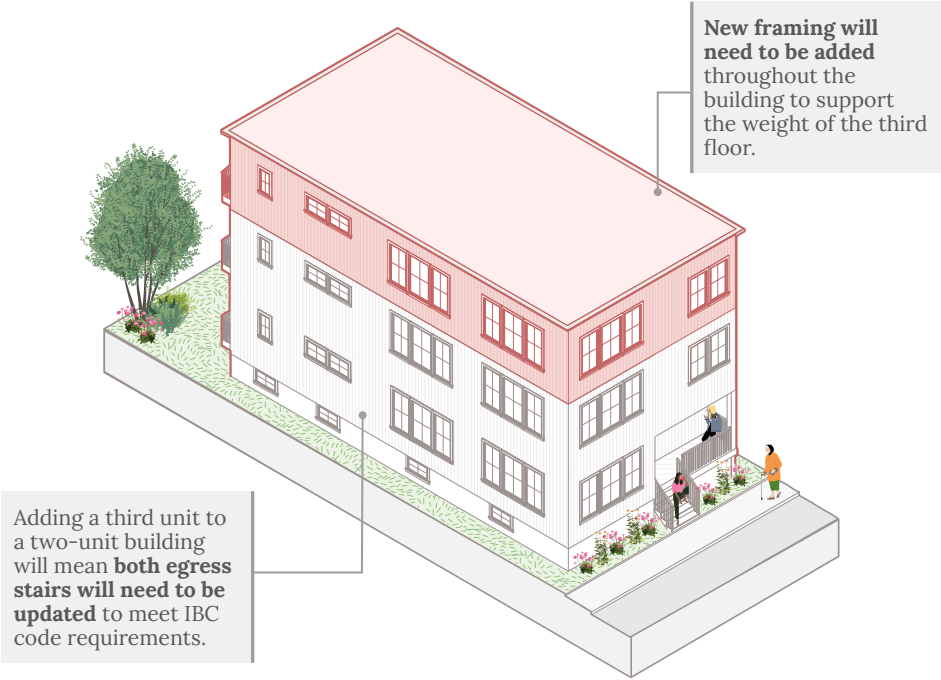
Shed dormers, like these in Jamaica Plain, are also common features in Boston, and can be added to some homes to convert an attic to an ADU.



# ADD ANOTHER FLOOR

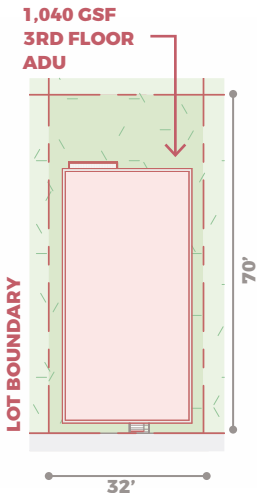


If your building is shorter than the maximum zoning height, you might be able to add an additional floor to create space for an ADU.



If your building is shorter than those around it, you may be able to add another floor or floors. This kind of addition may be best suited to projects where there are plans to renovate the entire house as you will need to run structural, plumbing and electrical systems down through the rest of the building from the new floor.

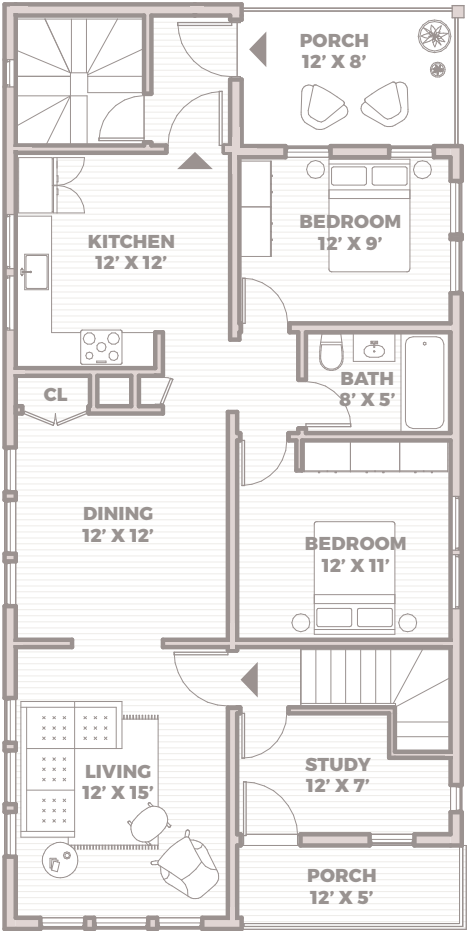
Adding a floor will typically mean that your architect will need to follow the commercial building code, which is required for buildings with three or more units. The change from residential to commercial code will trigger bringing all egress routes (stairs) up to the current commercial code and adding sprinklers throughout the building.



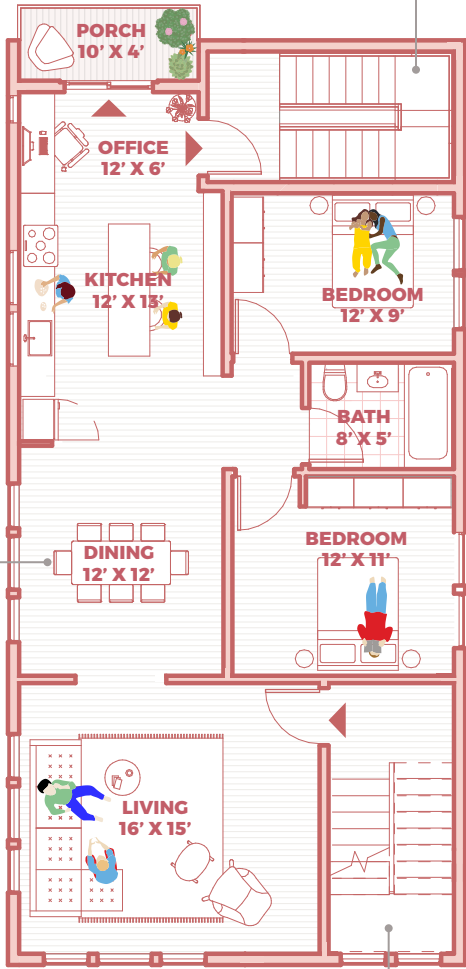




The building is **shorter than the maximum zoning height**, and the owner is interested in adding an additional floor to create space for an ADU.



Adding an entire floor is an opportunity to create an ADU with two or three bedrooms that can serve a larger household.

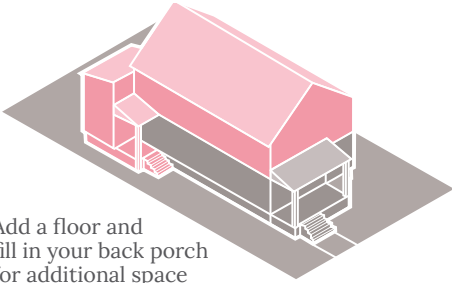


Two new egress stairs will be required for all units in a three-unit building with substantial new construction.

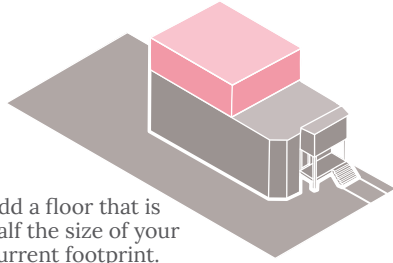
If the building has three units, egress stairs will need to be brought up to current building code requirements at all levels.

# MORE WAYS TO ADD A FLOOR

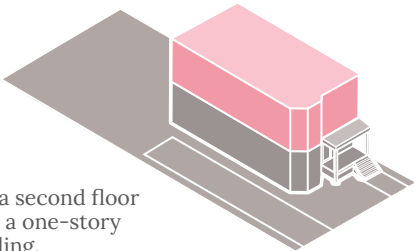
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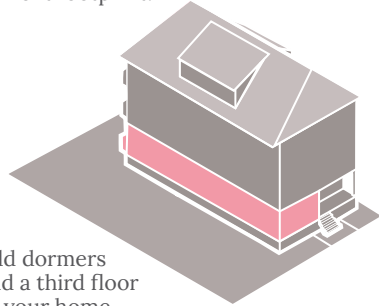
Add a floor and fill in your back porch for additional space for the ADU.



Add a floor that is half the size of your current footprint.



Add a second floor onto a one-story building.



Add dormers and a third floor to your home.

**The design shown on the previous spread illustrates how adding a third floor to a two-story building can create additional space.** A similar approach can be applied to other buildings; for instance, you could add a second floor to a one-story building or an extra floor to a 2.5-story building, depending on the configuration of the units and means of egress. The example in this book shows how adding an additional floor with a flat roof can be done. However, you can also add a floor with a pitched roof and potentially include dormers. In some cases, a pitched roof might be a better option to stay within zoning rules for maximum building height or to blend in with the architectural style of your neighborhood.

If you have a one-unit building and you are adding a floor to include an ADU, you would end up with a total of two units and would be below the three-unit threshold which would require your architect to follow the commercial building code.



This house in Jamaica Plain is one floor shorter than the surrounding context. It could be a good candidate for adding another floor.



One-story homes similar to this one in Allston are rare in Boston, but are ideal candidates for adding a floor or floors.



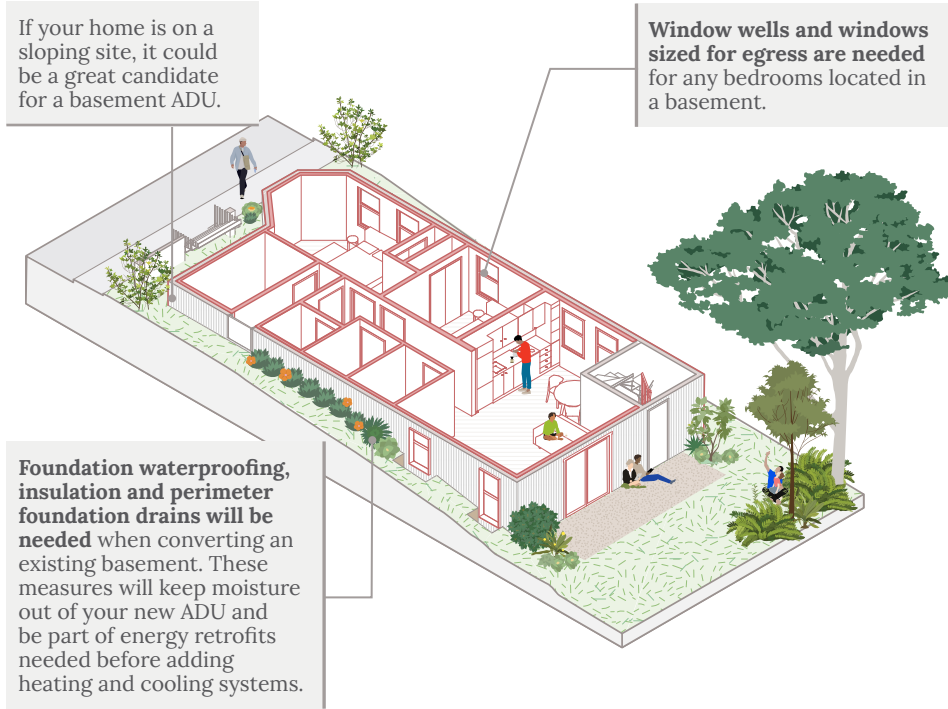
This Cambridge home, that was originally a single unit, has an addition and a new third floor that expand the building's living space.



# CONVERT YOUR BASEMENT

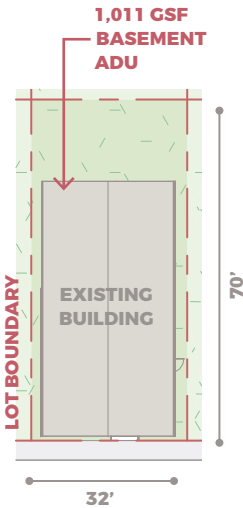


Is your basement partially above ground and underutilized? Turn it into an ADU.



**Many homes in Boston are located on sloped sites or built on elevated foundations. That means their existing basements have tall ceilings and the ability to add and expand windows.** These basements have the potential to be converted into an ADU that can host a family member with more privacy, be rented out for income, or accommodate live-in care.

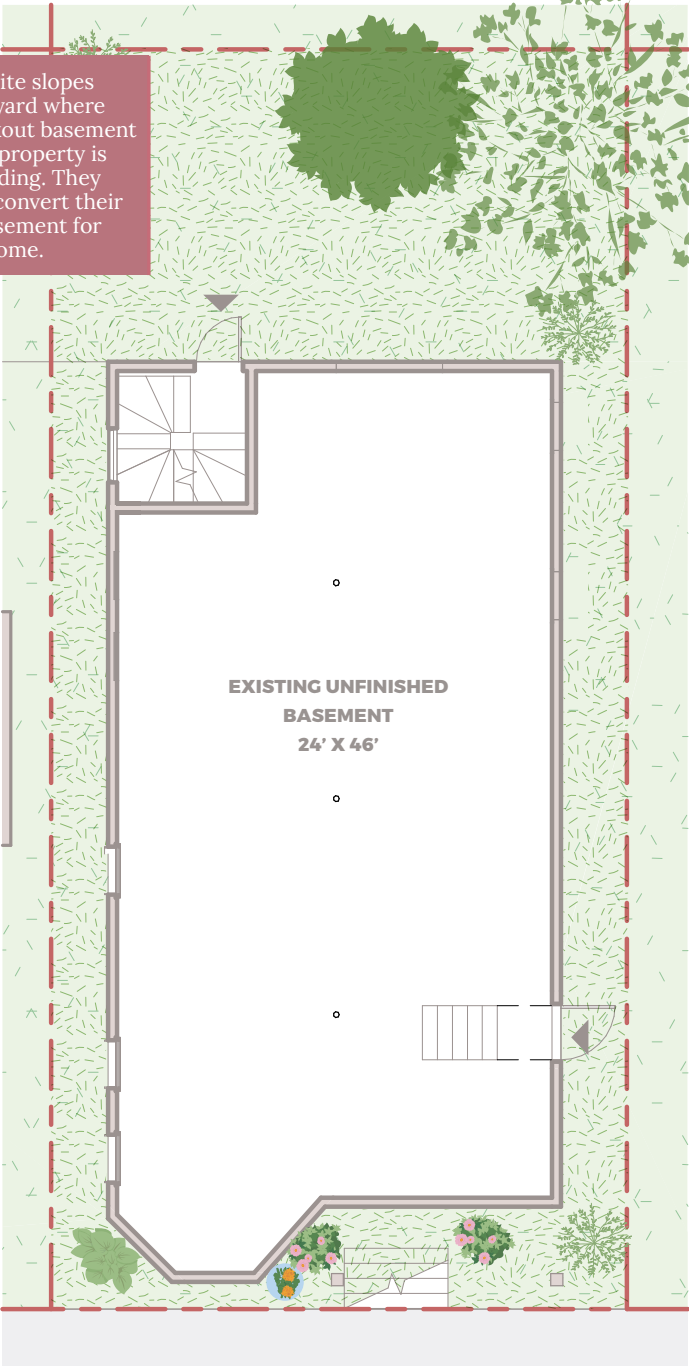
If you are considering converting your basement into an ADU, check if you have room for at least seven feet and six inches of clear space between the floor and ceiling. Building code will also require egress windows from all bedrooms located in a basement apartment. This type of ADU is not possible in any area vulnerable to flooding, such as within the Coastal Flood Resiliency Overlay.

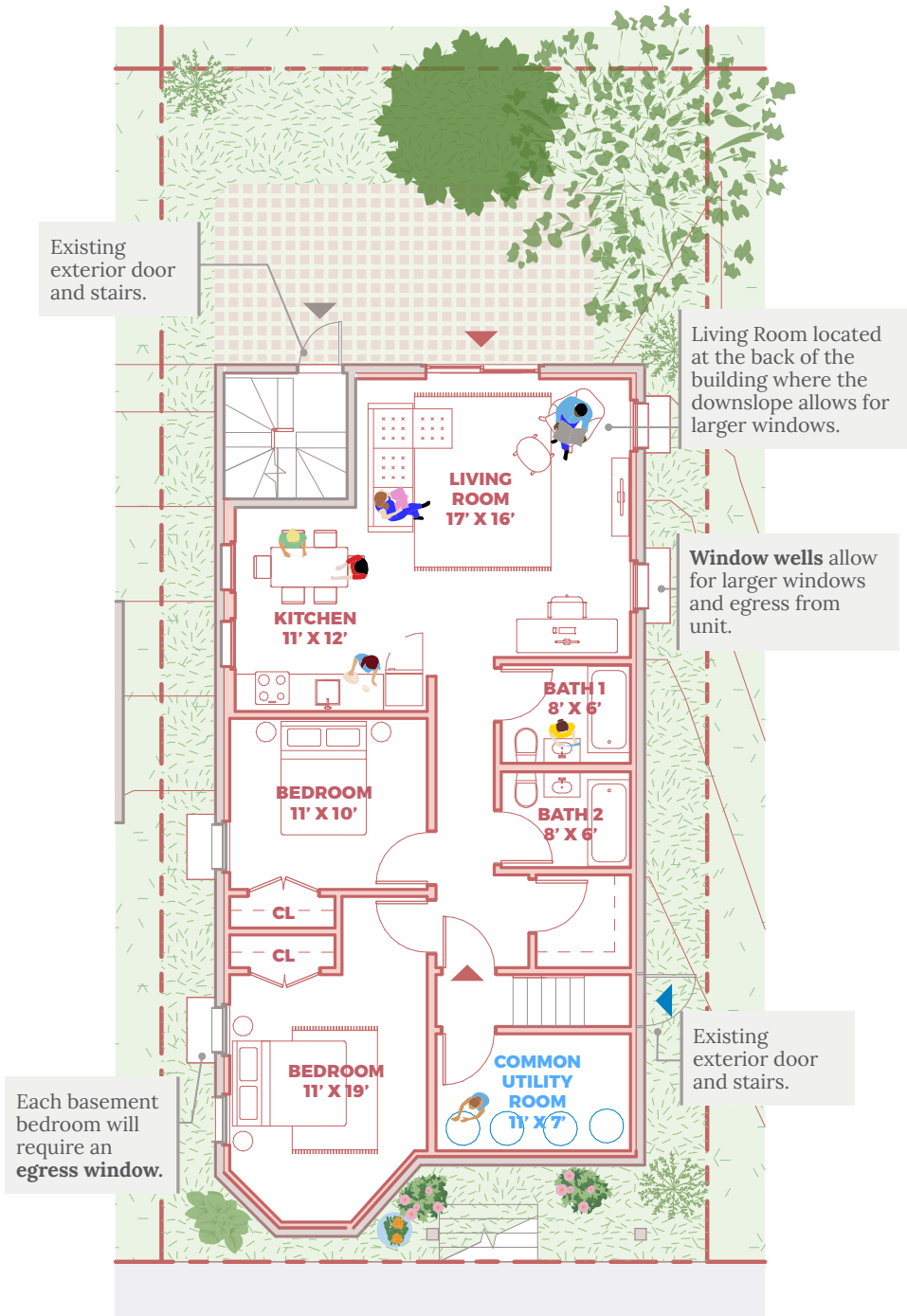




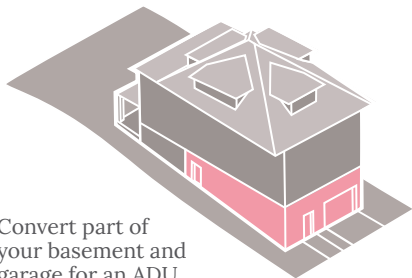


This owner's site slopes down to backyard where there is a walkout basement door, and the property is safe from flooding. They would like to convert their unfinished basement for additional income.

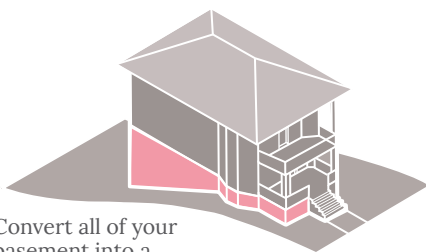




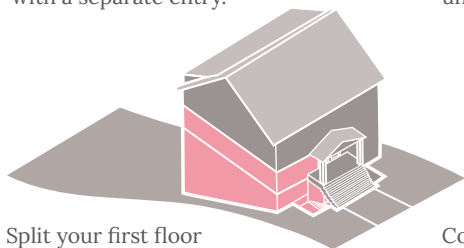
# MORE WAYS TO CONVERT YOUR BASEMENT



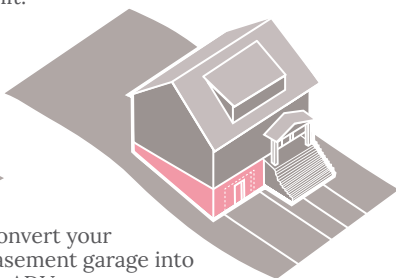
Convert part of your basement and garage for an ADU with a separate entry.



Convert all of your basement into a bottom floor unit.



Split your first floor and basement into one two-story unit.



Convert your basement garage into an ADU.

## **This approach to adding an ADU can be customized to fit your building and lot.**

In the example shown on the previous pages, the lot slopes downward from the front to the rear. Therefore, the living area is placed on the side of the basement that gets more natural light. If your lot slopes in the opposite direction, you may want to design the ADU with the living area on the side that faces the front of the lot to maximize natural light. This way, you can ensure that the most light-filled space is positioned where it will be most beneficial.

If you need to use space in the basement for storage or utilities, you can use a portion of the basement for the ADU and keep a portion for other uses. The key concepts will remain the same: you will need to ensure building code-required floor-to-ceiling height, provide code-required egress, update the exterior walls and site drainage to keep moisture out of the basement and upgrade the exterior walls and floor to meet existing energy codes.



At this house in Mission Hill, access to the basement has been incorporated at the front of the house.



This home, located on a sloping site in Somerville, has added large windows to the above grade portion of its basement facade.



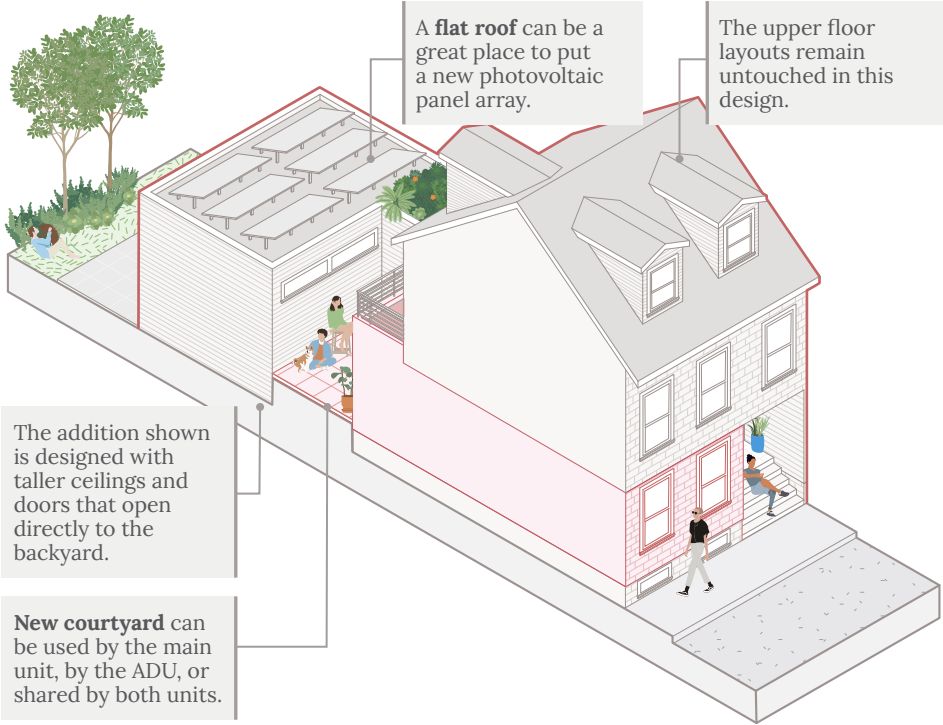
Bedroom basement windows that are partially below grade will require windows wells like the one in this image.



# EXTEND INTO THE REAR YARD

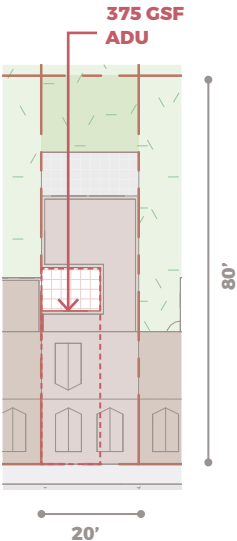


Do you have extra space in your backyard? Extend your rowhouse to the rear to create space for an ADU.



**Even very small parcels can fit an ADU. This design shows the addition of a studio apartment ADU on the first floor.** By keeping the access to the ADU close to the front door, the existing stair can be used just for the owner's unit.

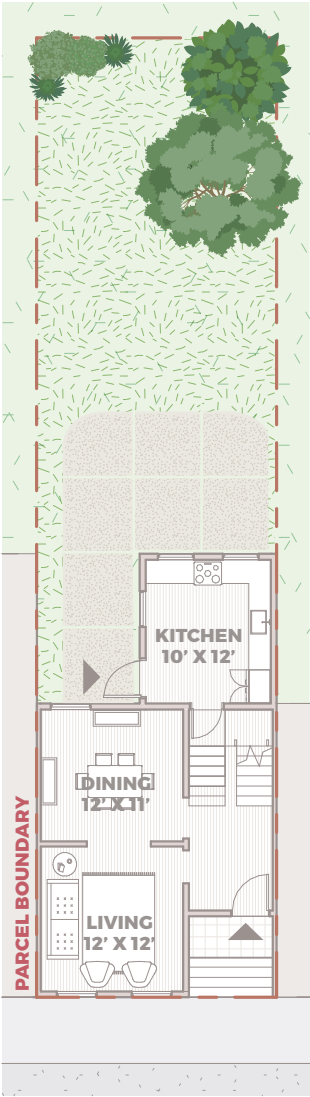
This ADU shows an addition in the backyard that lets the homeowner move the main unit's kitchen and living room into the addition in order to accommodate their new ADU. The new courtyard created between the addition and the ADU can be shared or be reserved for use by either just the ADU or just the main unit.



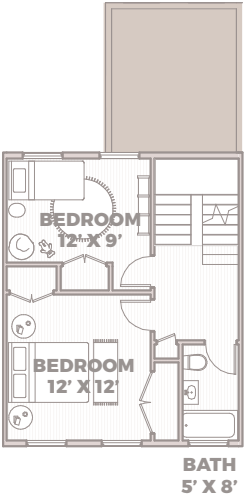




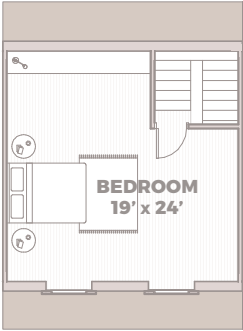
The owner has extra space in their backyard, and is looking to add a small unit in their home for a family member.



EXISTING FIRST FLOOR

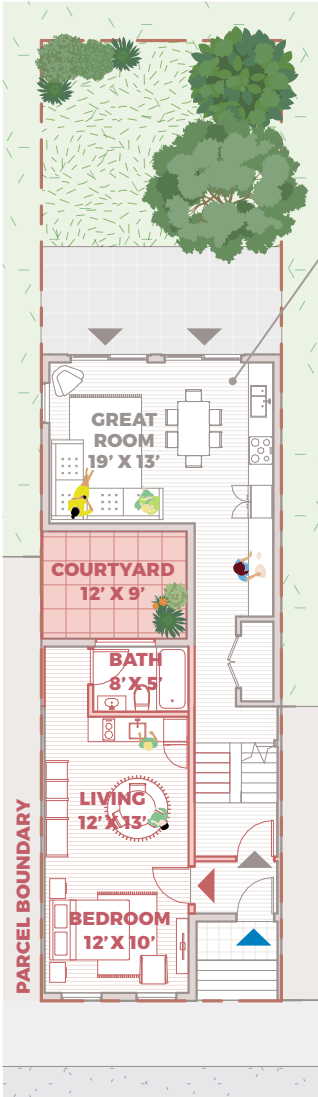


SECOND FLOOR

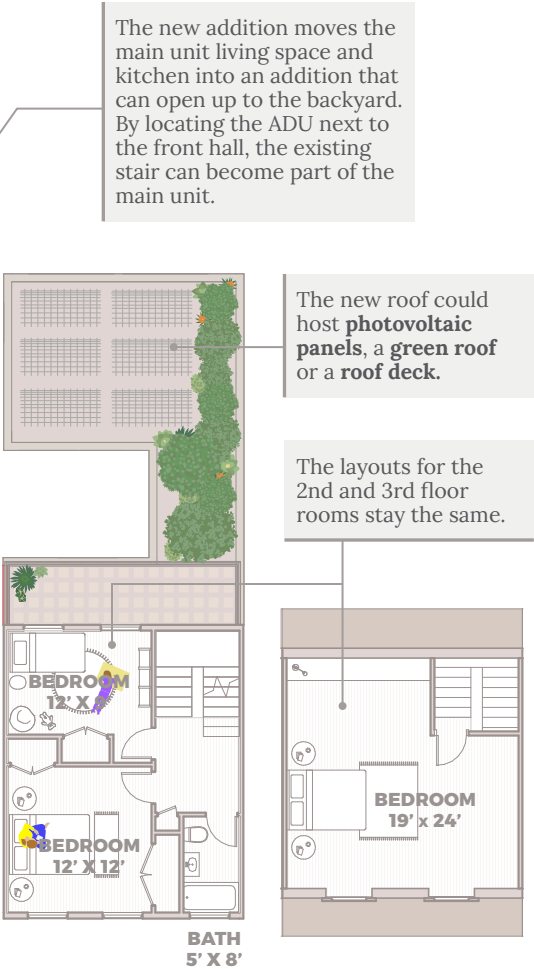


THIRD FLOOR

When designing an ADU for a rowhouse, check the zoning code for specific constraints on party walls.



FIRST FLOOR WITH ADU



SECOND FLOOR

THIRD FLOOR





New courtyard is a great way to get additional natural light into both units.

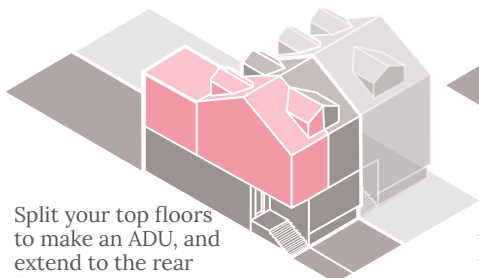
New living space for the main unit is located in the addition.

The new courtyard can be for the main unit or the ADU, or be a **shared space**.

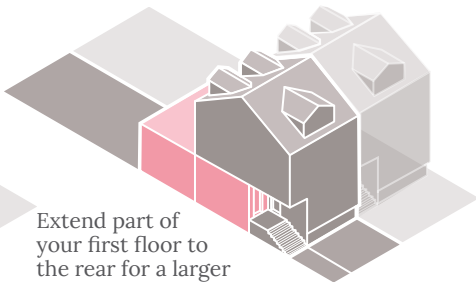
The extension of space also creates a new deck on the second floor.



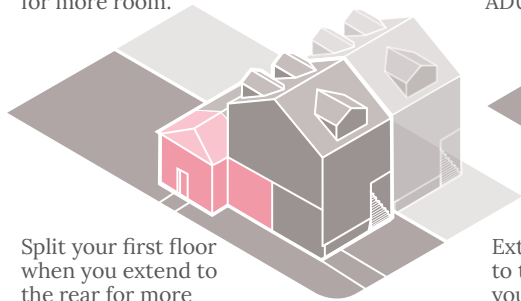
# MORE WAYS TO EXTEND INTO THE REAR YARD



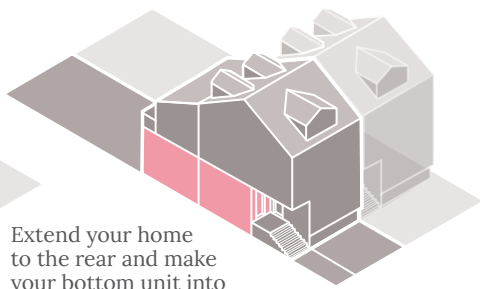
Split your top floors to make an ADU, and extend to the rear for more room.



Extend part of your first floor to the rear for a larger ADU.



Split your first floor when you extend to the rear for more space.



Extend your home to the rear and make your bottom unit into an ADU.

**For rowhouses and other homes with very small side yards, extending towards the backyard is often the best way to add space for an ADU.**

You can arrange this space in a few different ways. For example, one option is to place the ADU towards the front of the building, which keeps the ADU close to the entrance and allows the existing stair to be incorporated into the main unit. Adding a new courtyard can give the ADU some outdoor space and extra natural light. Alternatively, you could make the existing stair into a common space or thoroughway. This would allow your architect to position the ADU towards the back of the building, on an upper floor, or in the basement.

If your rowhouse is on a corner lot, you may have more design flexibility. You could place the ADU entrance on the side of the lot, separate from the main unit's entrance. If you have a corner lot, talk to your architect about different design options and where to best place the entrances to the new unit.



These rowhouses in Mission Hill feature deep backyards and walk out basements — site conditions that could make adding an ADU possible.



Wooden rowhouses and semi-detached houses like this Jamaica Plain example may not have existing fire walls. Review with your architect what the design implications may be if that is the case.



Some rowhouses, such as this example in Mission Hill, do have side yards, side access and light and air easements, which can mean other opportunities for adding additional windows or a separate entrance for an ADU.



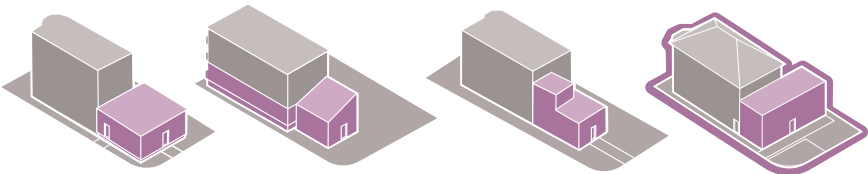
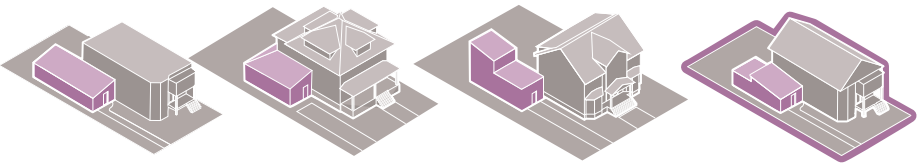
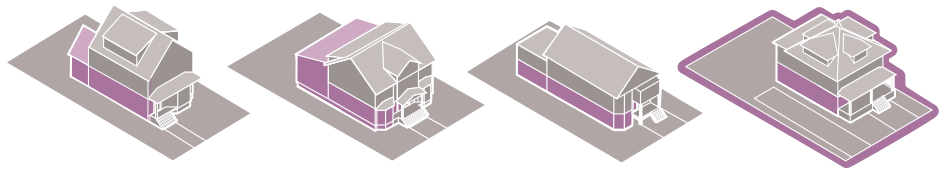




# MEDIUM LOTS

*I have a mid-sized yard or driveway.*





## **ADAPT YOUR GARAGE**

**79**

*My lot has an existing building on it. I want to convert it into an ADU separate from the main unit.*

## **EXTEND TOWARDS THE BACKYARD**

**87**

*I have a lot with extra backyard space. I want to add an ADU with at least two to three bedrooms.*

## **ATTACH AN ADU ON THE SIDE**

**95**

*My lot has enough room on the side for an ADU with at least one or two bedrooms.*

## **ATTACH AN ADU ON A CORNER LOT**

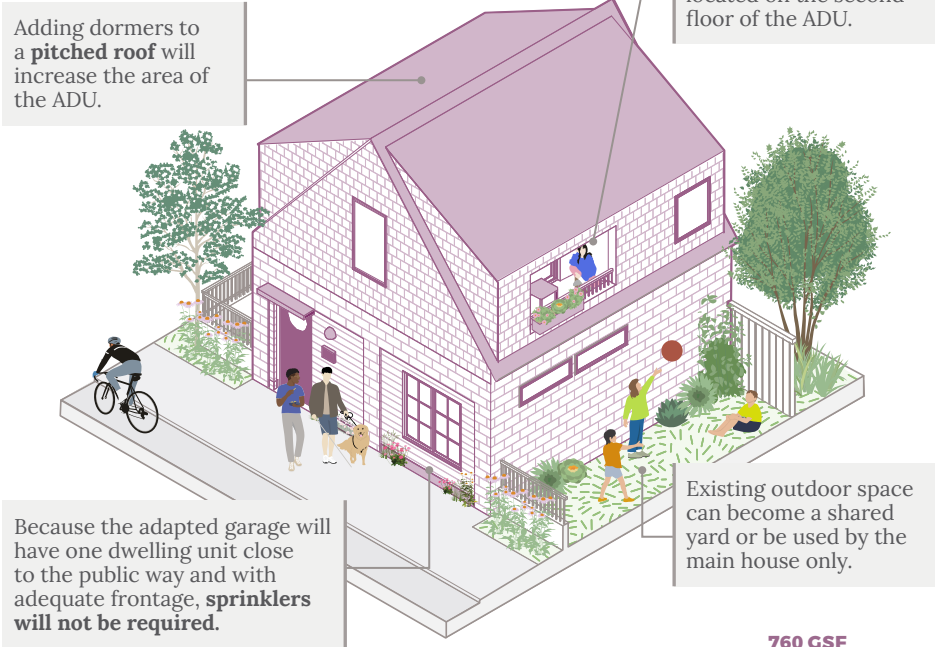
**103**

*I have a corner lot and would like to have an ADU that is directly accessible from the street.*

# ADAPT YOUR GARAGE

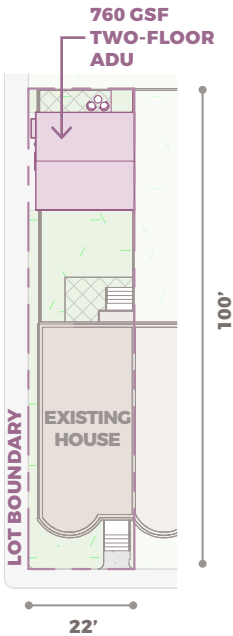


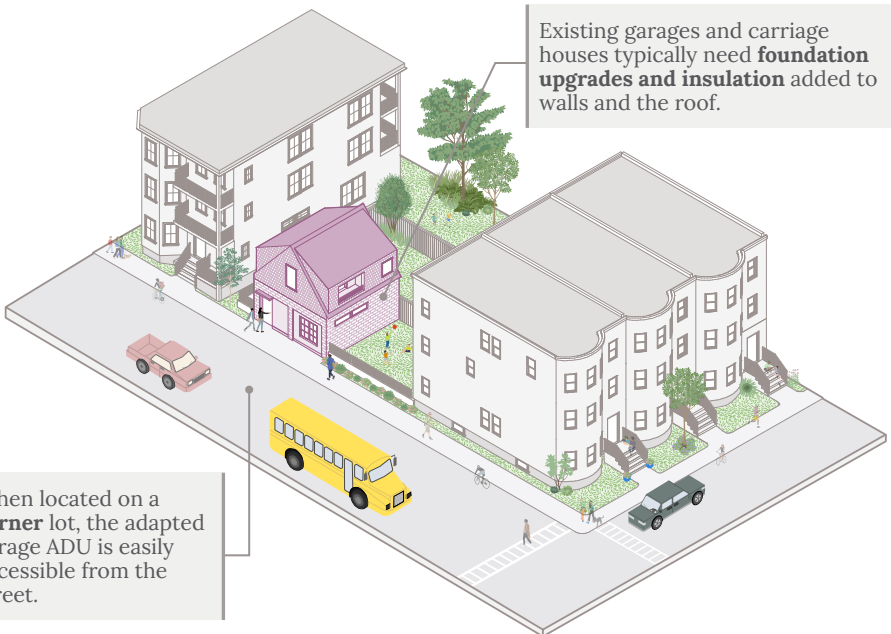
Do you have a small garage building that you do not use anymore? Convert it into an ADU.



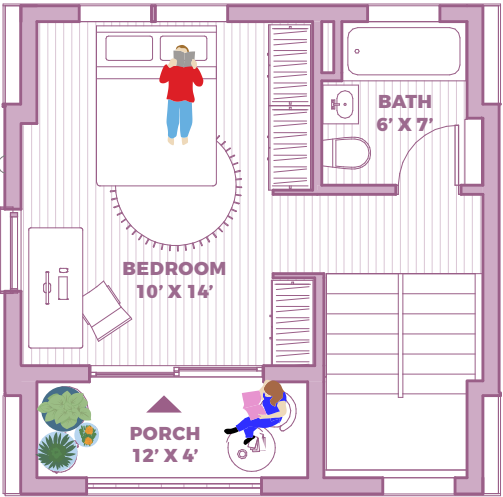
**If you have a small garage, barn, or even a tool shed or workshop on your lot, you might consider converting it into an ADU.** Adapting an existing building, or rebuilding in place, can be a great way to add an ADU that is separate from the main unit and in keeping with the scale of other outbuildings in your neighborhood.

Your design team will assess which parts of the building can be reused and determine which elements, like load-bearing walls or support beams, should not be altered. They will recommend upgrades to the building envelope for thermal efficiency, to add heating and cooling systems, and to add water and sanitary connections to the building.



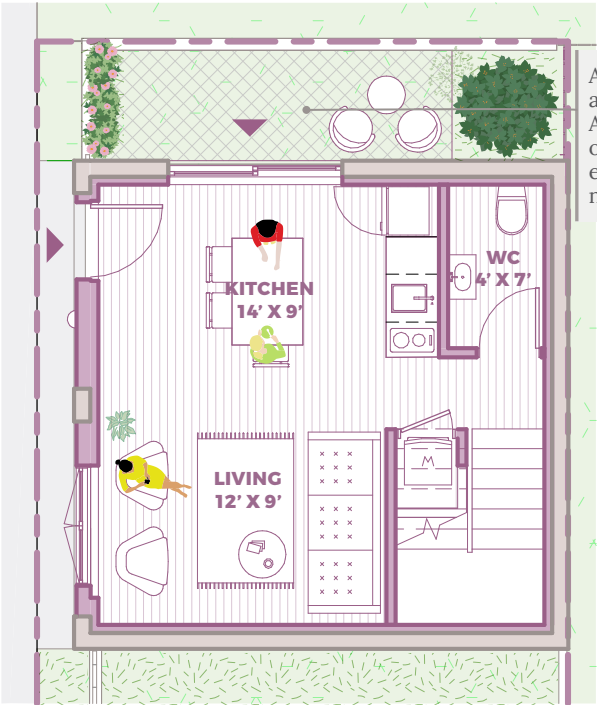


The owner has a historic garage on their lot that they do not use, and want to be able to rent it out for additional income.



ADU - LEVEL 2

1/8" = 1'-0"



Adapting garages allows for the ADU to have its own separate entrance, and a new deck.

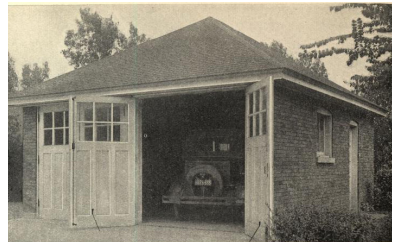
ADU - LEVEL 1

1/8" = 1'-0"

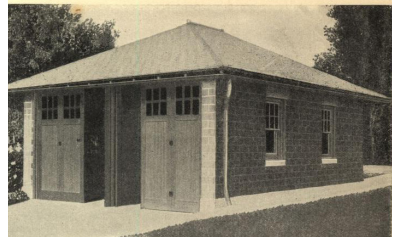




Many houses in Boston were built in the early part of the 20th century and their garages and carriage houses were also built at that time. In the 1910s and 1920s, prior to the spread of gas stations, gasoline for cars was kept in a home garage. As a consequence, these structures were built with masonry and located as far to the back and side of parcels as possible.



Because these buildings were built at parcel edges, they are often not compliant with current zoning required setbacks for residential use. The non-compliant location on the parcel may be appropriate; but if the structure is demolished, it may make sense to shift its location away from the lot line.



Planning for **ample storage** is an important part of making sure your ADU will work well over time.

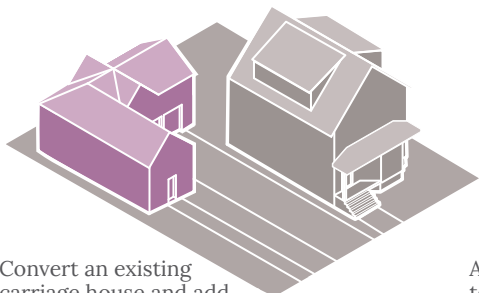




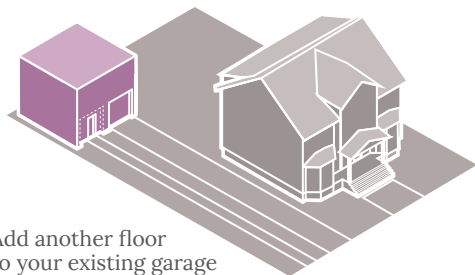


The existing back yard is shown as private to the main house, but could be **shared** by the house and ADU.

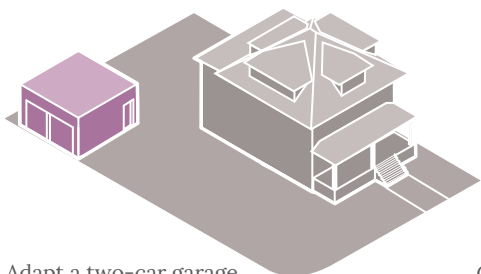
# MORE WAYS TO ADAPT AN EXISTING BUILDING ON YOUR LOT



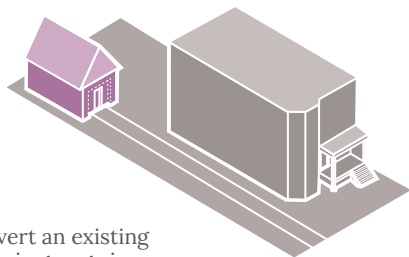
Convert an existing carriage house and add an addition to create a large ADU.



Add another floor to your existing garage for extra space.



Adapt a two-car garage on the side of your lot for an ADU with street frontage.



Convert an existing historic garage in your backyard into an ADU.

**A small garage can often be repurposed into a one- or two-bedroom home.** If keeping the existing garage roof in place, a loft space can typically be added above a portion of the living space. If the roof is replaced with a full or half second floor, more living space can be added — or even living space and a second floor porch.

Generally a garage or accessory building that is to the side of your building or alongside a street will be easier to adapt into an ADU. **Garages or accessory structures at the rear of the lot will require more work in terms of connecting to utilities and will require sprinklers if more than 25 feet from the street.** Carefully evaluating the structure and planning for utility connections will help ensure a smooth conversion process and create a comfortable, functional ADU.



This is an example of a West Roxbury two-unit house with a two-car garage and no driveway.



This side yard garage in Jamaica Plain has about the same frontage as the house on the lot and is roughly the footprint of a typical ADU.



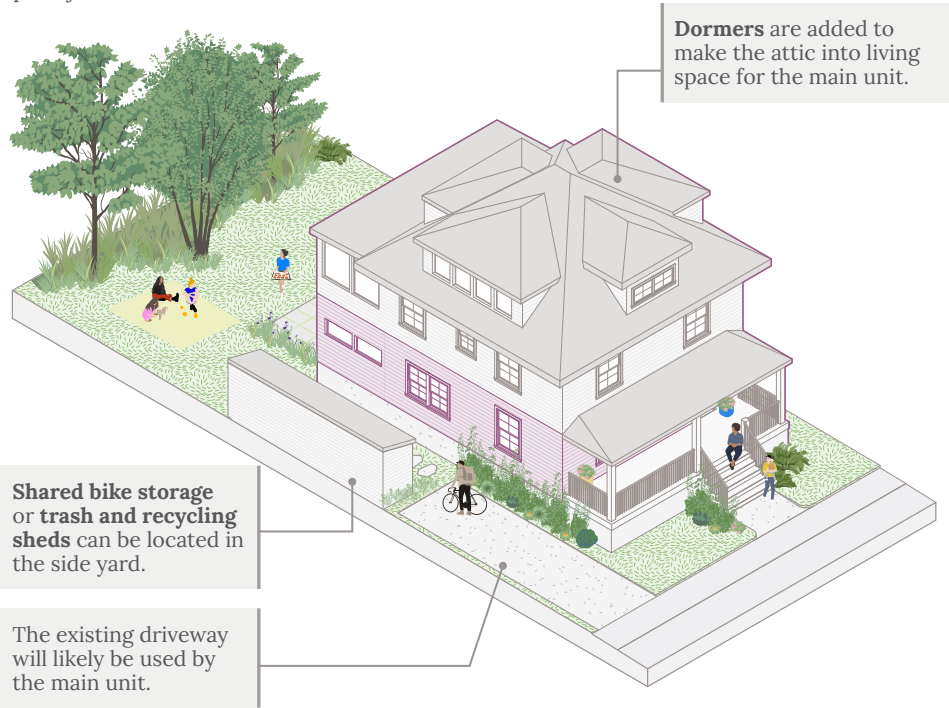
This is an example of a Mission Hill two-unit house with a typical 20' x 20' historic garage at the back of the lot. If the garage were converted to an ADU, it would require sprinklers and the driveway would need to be converted to an unobstructed emergency access path.



# EXTEND TO THE REAR

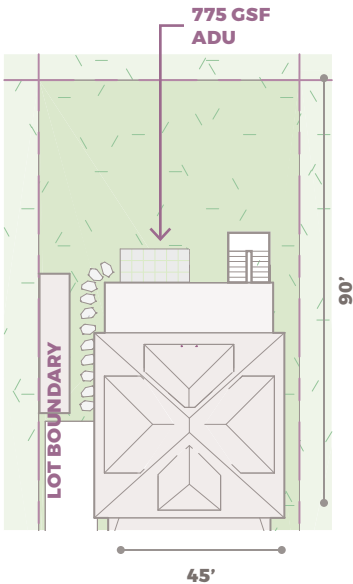


*Do you have a large backyard? Consider extending your building to the rear to create space for the ADU.*



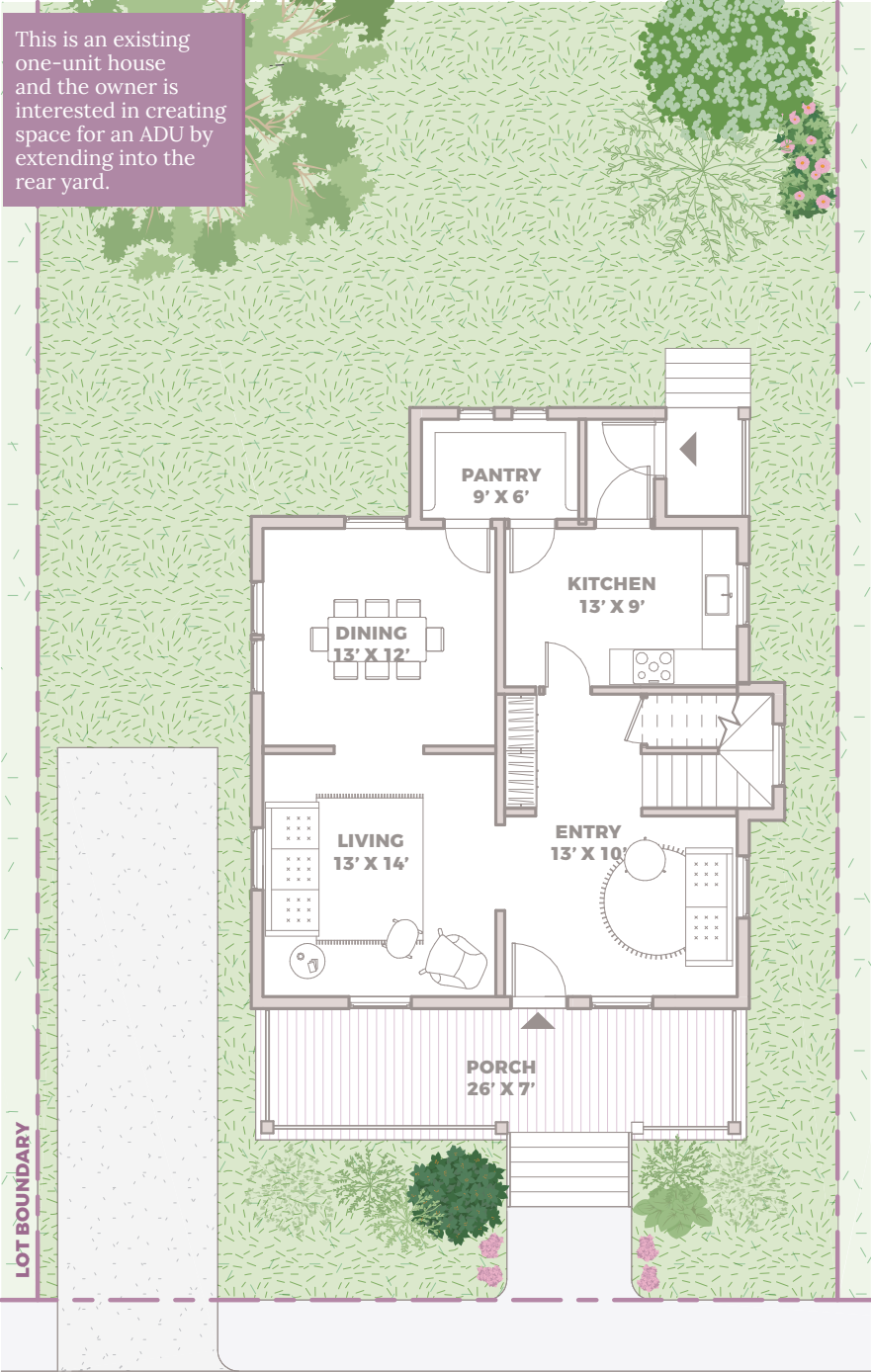
**If you have enough backyard space, consider extending your house toward the rear to create room for a new ADU.** In this example, the homeowners also added dormers to create livable space in the attic, but similar results could be achieved without dormers.

These changes convert the single-unit house into a home with a four-bedroom main unit and a one-bedroom ADU. The ADU occupies the first level, while the main unit occupies the second and third levels. Both units share a common entry. Since the building has only two units and a shared entrance close to the street, sprinklers will not be required.









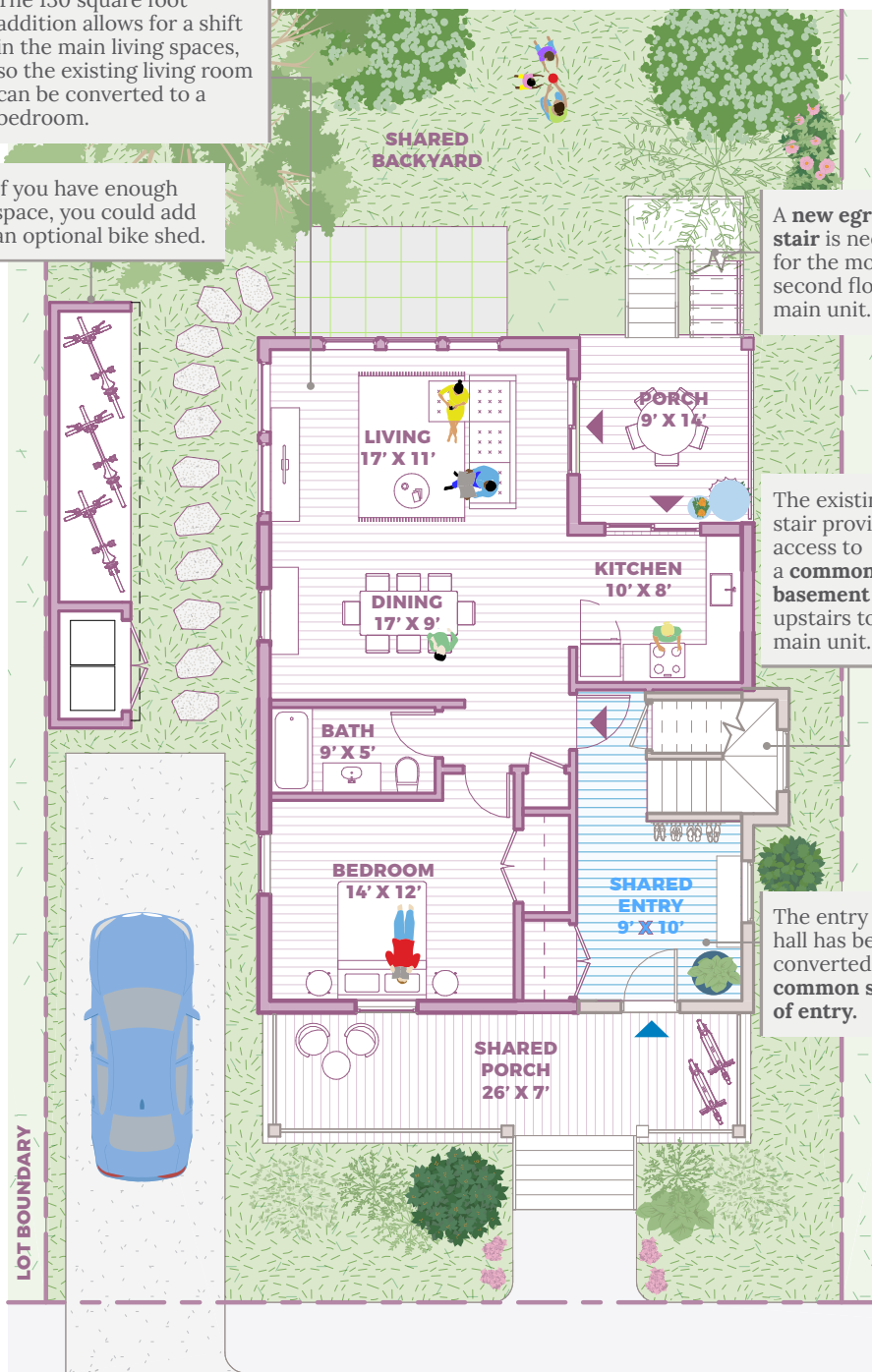
The 130 square foot addition allows for a shift in the main living spaces, so the existing living room can be converted to a bedroom.

If you have enough space, you could add an optional bike shed.

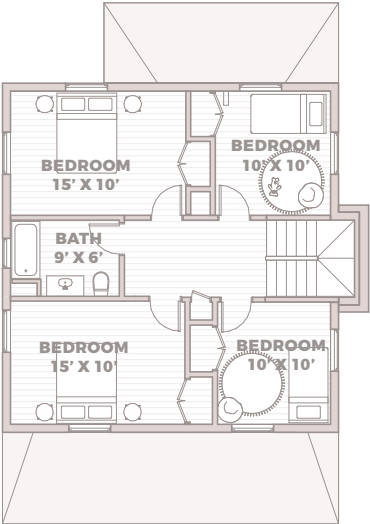
A new egress stair is needed for the moved second floor main unit.

The existing stair provides access to a **common basement** and upstairs to the main unit.

The entry hall has been converted to a **common space of entry**.

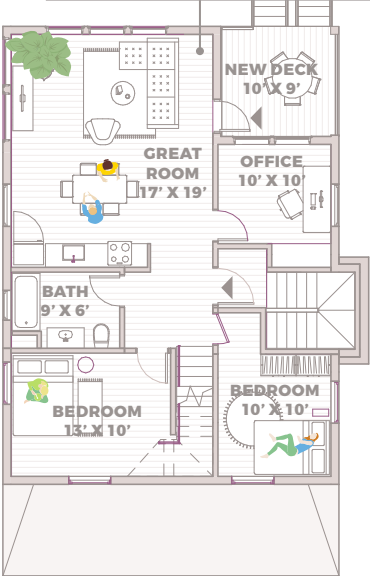


Currently, the owner has an unfinished attic that is underutilized and is interested in turning it into a liveable space.



ORIGINAL SECOND FLOOR PLAN

Second floor bedrooms move up to the finished attic, making space for a living area, office, and a **new deck** for the main unit.



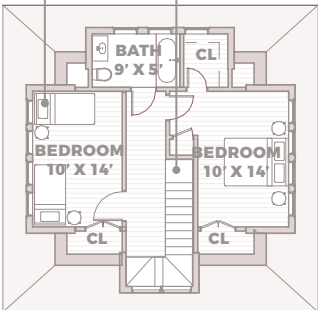
SECOND FLOOR PLAN –  
MAIN UNIT ADDITION

On the third floor, **new bedrooms and a new bathroom** for the main unit would have great views and ample access to **natural light**.

The main unit has a new stair added above the second floor stair to lead to additional bedrooms on the third floor.

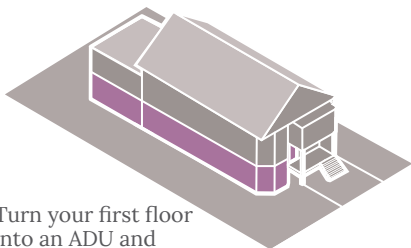


THIRD FLOOR PLAN –  
UNFINISHED ATTIC

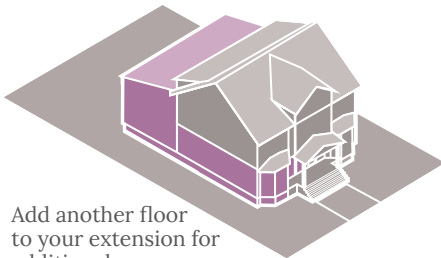


THIRD FLOOR PLAN –  
MAIN UNIT THIRD FLOOR

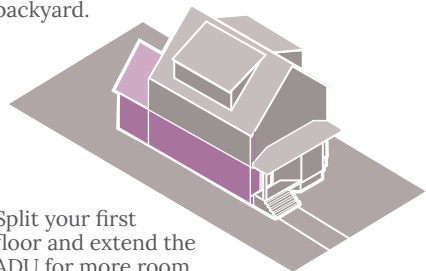
# MORE WAYS TO EXTEND TOWARDS THE BACKYARD



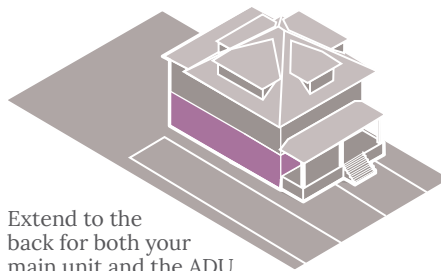
Turn your first floor into an ADU and extend into the backyard.



Add another floor to your extension for additional space.



Split your first floor and extend the ADU for more room.



Extend to the back for both your main unit and the ADU.

**The design on the previous pages illustrates a one bedroom ADU occupying part of the first floor and the conversion of an existing entry room into a common entry space for both units.** If a homeowner has the space and budget for it, an additional bedroom or office could also be added in the new addition.

As shown in the scheme on the previous pages, the addition of hipped dormers at the roof adds more living space at the third floor, while maintaining the existing ridge lines and architectural style of the original building. Alternatively, the homeowner could choose to proceed only with the backyard extension while keeping the unfinished attic or converting it to one finished space with skylights and the existing dormer window.

Some homeowners may prefer using the second or third floor for the ADU and to use the addition added in the back to add more space to the main unit or to convert it to a living space better suited to aging in place or for people with mobility concerns. While the ADU will always be smaller than the main unit, there are no rules dictating which unit should occupy the top or bottom levels.



This Jamaica Plain project included a two-story rear addition adding two new units to an existing home (that was simultaneously renovated). The addition also extended beyond the side of the original home, so the new units on this lot are larger than most ADUs.



This Jamaica Plain rear addition created new garage and outdoor living area. A similar approach could be taken to build an ADU.



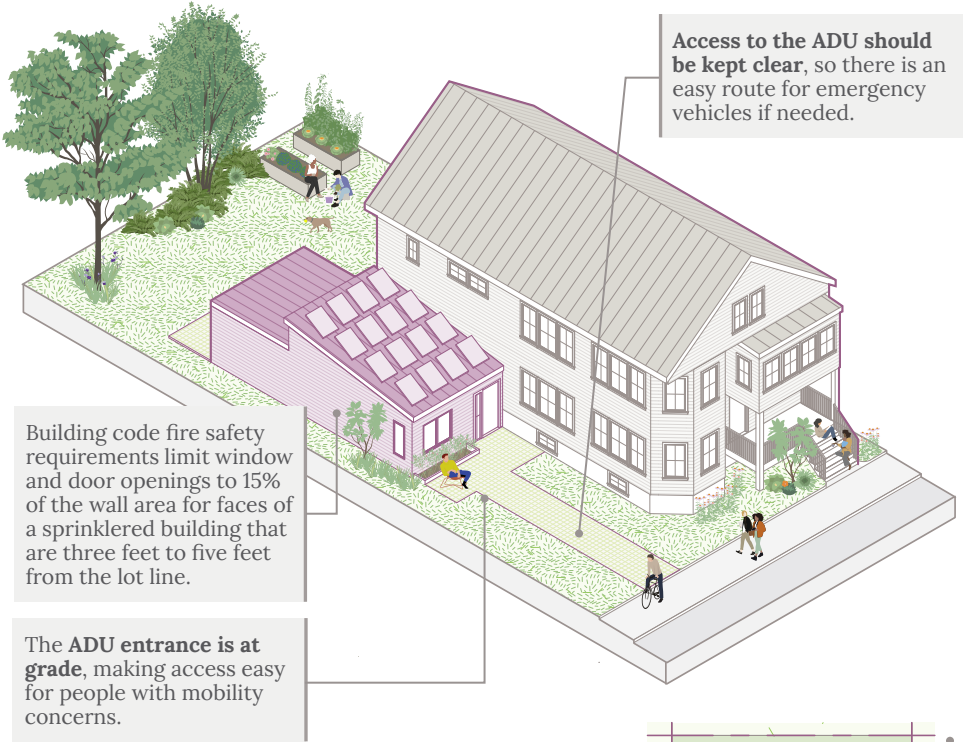
In this example of a multi-unit house in Cambridge with an addition in the back, the stair to the basement could be used as one of the egress doors from a potential ADU.



# ATTACH AN ADU ON THE SIDE

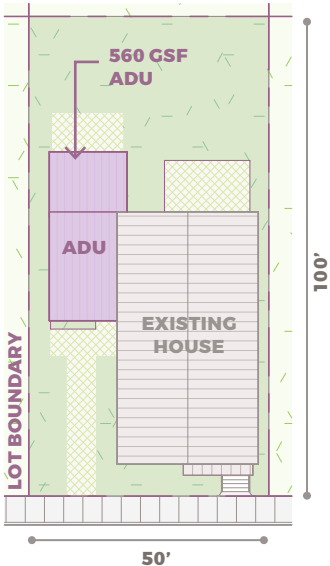


*Do you have at least one generous side yard? Consider building an ADU that attaches to the side of your building.*



**If you have twenty feet or more in one of your house's side yards, an ADU can be added next to your home.** This side attached ADU is designed to have a very low impact on the existing building and is situated so that it will be easy to tie into the existing building's water and sanitary lines. The ADU entrance can be at grade, meaning there is no need to climb steps to get in the ADU.

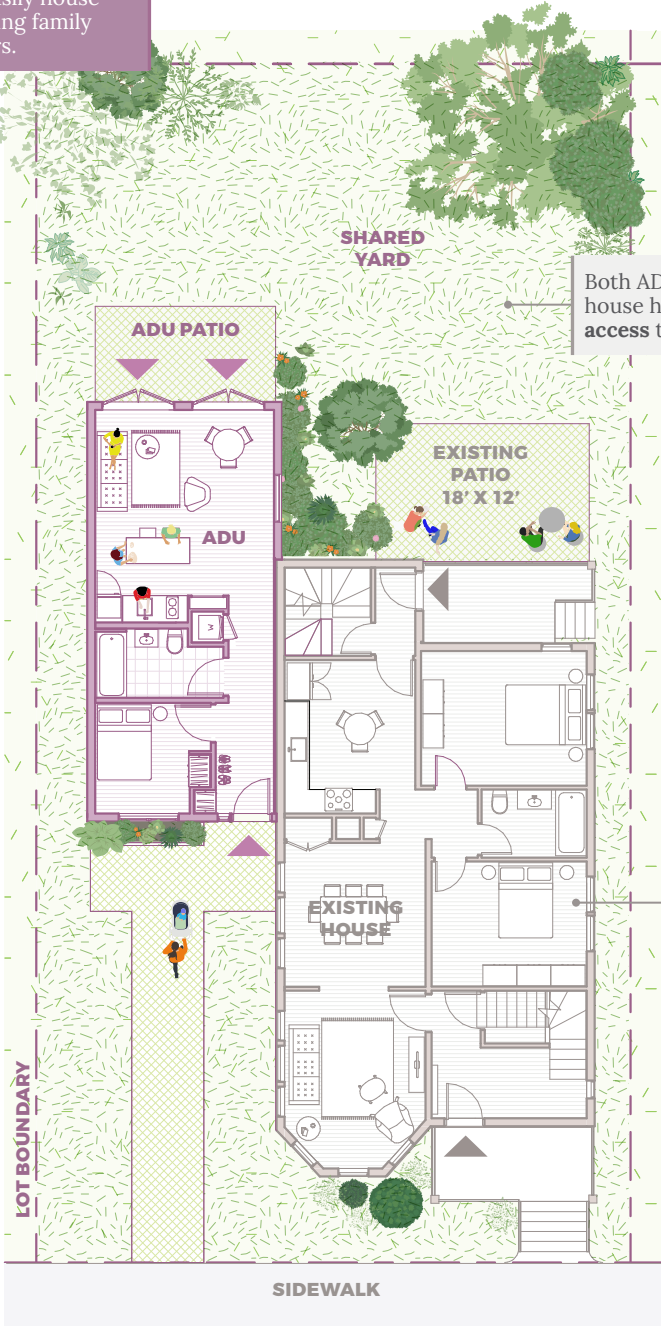
The roof of your ADU can be shaped to let in daylight in cases where window placement may be restricted by code or privacy requirements. Additionally, you could pitch the roof to maximize southern exposure for photovoltaic panels.





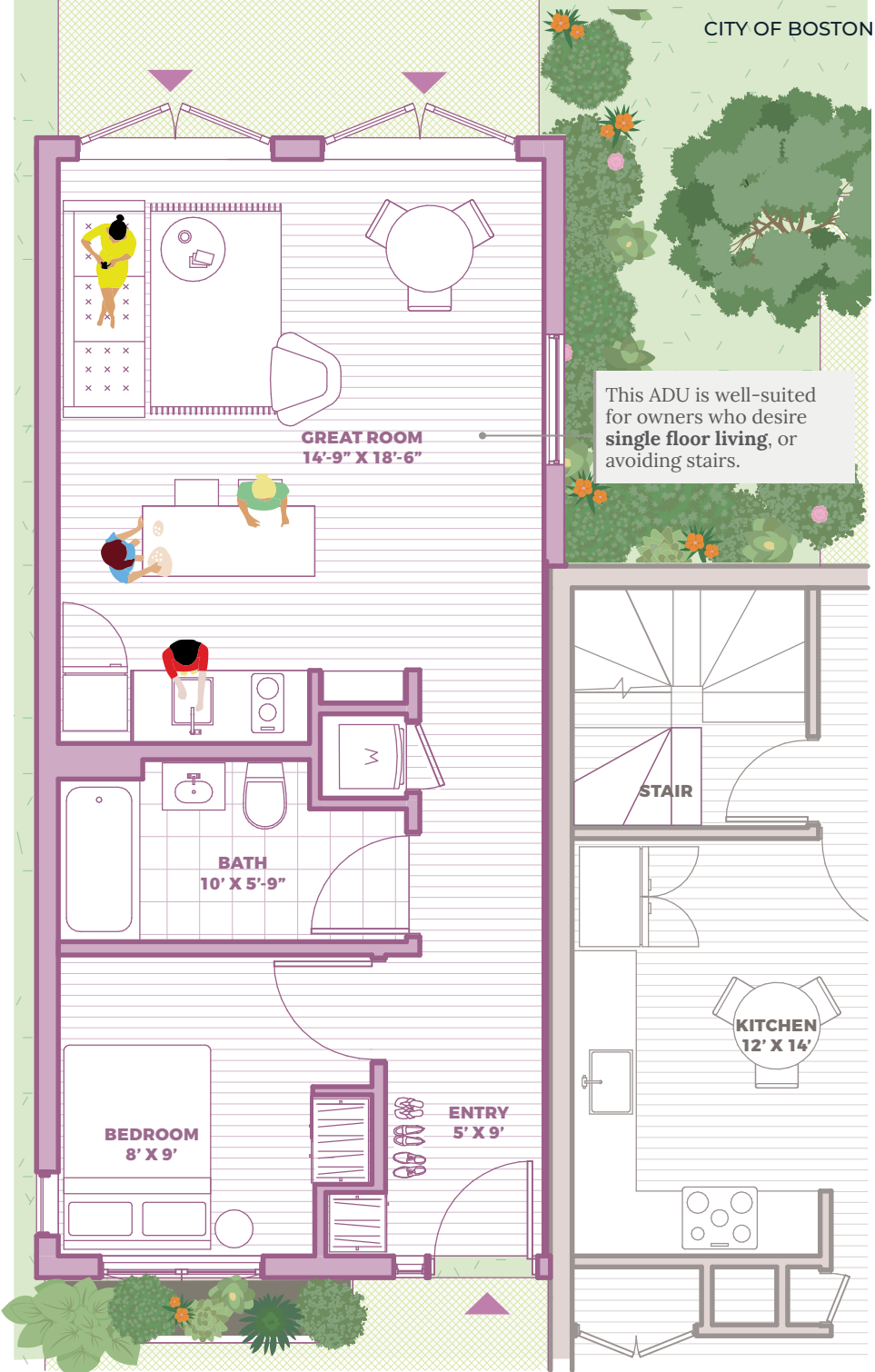


The owner would like to add an ADU to their side yard that could easily house their aging family members.



OVERALL GROUND FLOOR PLAN

1/16" = 1'-0"



ENLARGED ADU FLOOR PLAN





**Clerestory windows** above kitchen let in light while preserving privacy.

**Sliding glass doors** can be used to provide access to sunlight and for natural ventilation.

Kitchen island can double as an eating area. An efficient kitchen will leave more space available for living area.

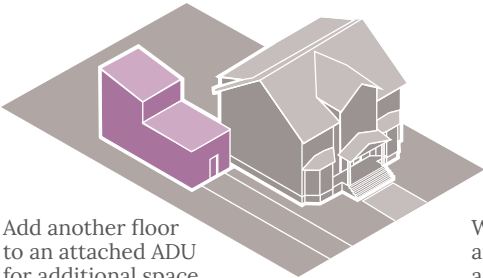




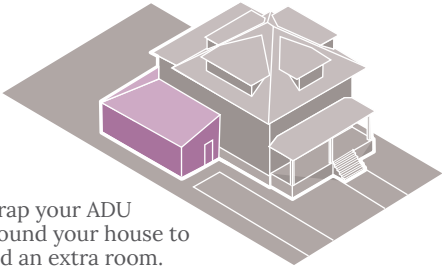
**Full bathroom** and **washer/dryer** are located next to entry hall.

Bedroom is positioned to allow for windows looking towards front yard. Large windows will make a small room feel larger.

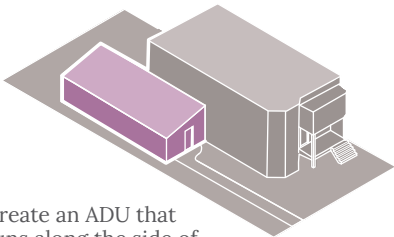
# MORE WAYS TO ATTACH AN ADU ON THE SIDE OF YOUR BUILDING



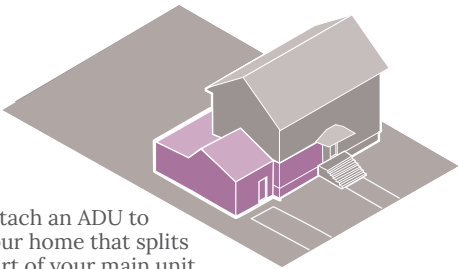
Add another floor to an attached ADU for additional space.



Wrap your ADU around your house to add an extra room.



Create an ADU that runs along the side of your lot if you have space.



Attach an ADU to your home that splits part of your main unit.

If your side yard is larger than what is shown in the design shown on previous pages, you might be able to apply a similar design logic to create a more spacious ADU, such as a one- or two-bedroom unit added to the side of your home. For instance, a wider side yard could accommodate a larger ADU footprint, providing additional living space without reducing the size of the main unit.

Elements like porches or decks at the front or rear of your ADU are optional. Whether they are feasible depends on the size of your yard. For example, a deep backyard might allow for a spacious deck, while a smaller yard might limit these options. When planning for decks, it is also important to consider any existing trees. **Preservation of good sized trees should be a priority.** Their placement could influence the size and location of the deck, ensuring that the natural landscape is maintained alongside your new ADU.



This diagram illustrates the twenty foot minimum requirement for building a side yard ADU on both an infill lot (left) and a corner lot (right).

An existing screened porch like the one at this West Roxbury home could be the starting point for a new ADU in your side yard.



With large existing homes on large parcels like this Roslindale home, the ADU may be created by using part of the existing home in addition to new construction in the side yard.



Even small attachments on the side of a principal building, like this one in Jamaica Plain, can aid in the creation of an ADU.

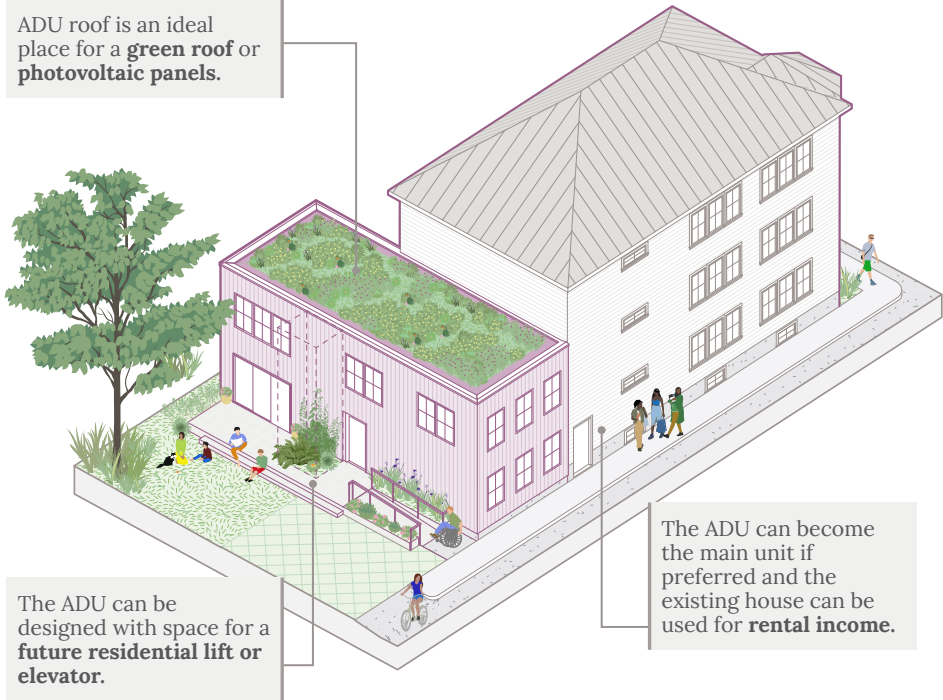




# ATTACH AN ADU ON A CORNER LOT

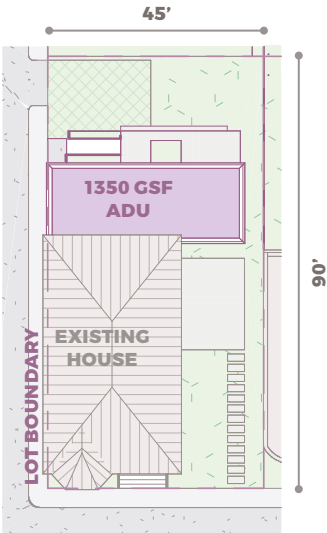


Is your building on a corner lot? Consider attaching an ADU that can be easily accessed from one side of the lot.



If you have a large backyard on a corner lot, an ADU can be attached to the back of your existing house. A corner lot makes it easier to provide direct access to the ADU from the sidewalk.

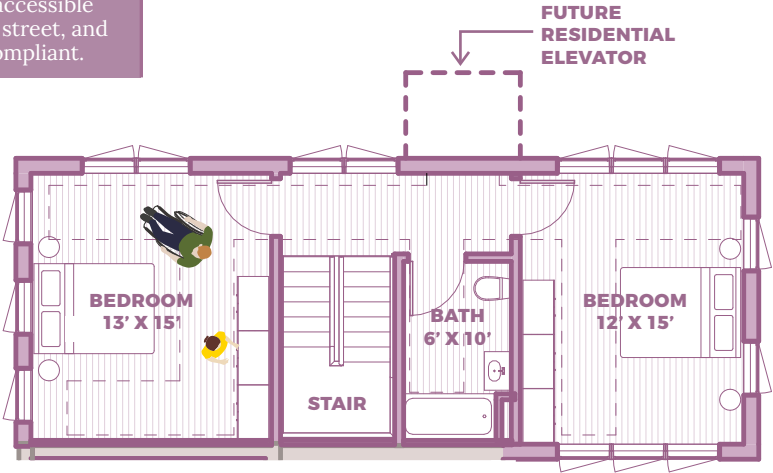
This version shows a two-story ADU that is designed so that it could easily convert to a fully accessible home. If you are planning to age in place in your ADU, planning bathrooms, kitchens and entrances that are sized for accessibility will make it much easier to convert your home. You may also want to plan for a future residential elevator and accessible circulation from existing driveways or from the sidewalk to your front door.







This owner would like to have an ADU that is easily accessible from the street, and is ADA compliant.



ENLARGED ADU SECOND FLOOR PLAN



ENLARGED ADU GROUND FLOOR PLAN



SECTION PERSPECTIVE

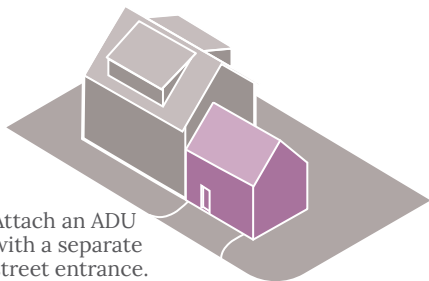


Space for a future  
**residential elevator**  
if needed.

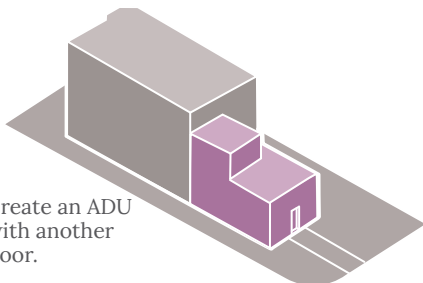




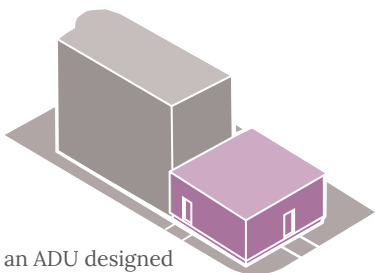
# MORE WAYS TO ATTACH AN ADU ON A CORNER LOT



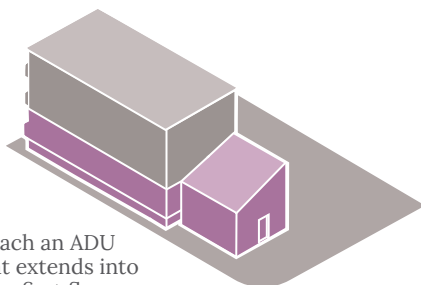
Attach an ADU with a separate street entrance.



Create an ADU with another floor.



Make an ADU designed for single-story living and easy street access.



Attach an ADU that extends into your first floor.

**A corner lot generally offers more flexibility in terms of access to the ADU, including the placement of the door, driveway options, and even multiple entry points.** For example, the door could be positioned on the side street for more privacy, or facing the main street for easier visibility and access. Additionally, a corner lot could allow for separate entrances for the main unit and the ADU, providing greater independence for occupants.

The design on the previous spreads illustrates how a residential elevator could be added to the two-story ADU to make it fully accessible. As an alternative, if space permits, the ADU could be designed as a single-story unit to eliminate stairs. The flexibility of a corner lot also allows for creative landscaping around the ADU, further enhancing the outdoor living space while maintaining accessibility.



An attached ADU was added to this Allston home on a corner lot to facilitate multigenerational living for a family, specifically independent living for an adult family member with a disability.



A home on a corner lot in Roslindale where a potential ADU could have a separate entrance on the cross street.



Example of a single-unit house in Cambridge with an attached ADU in the corner side yard.

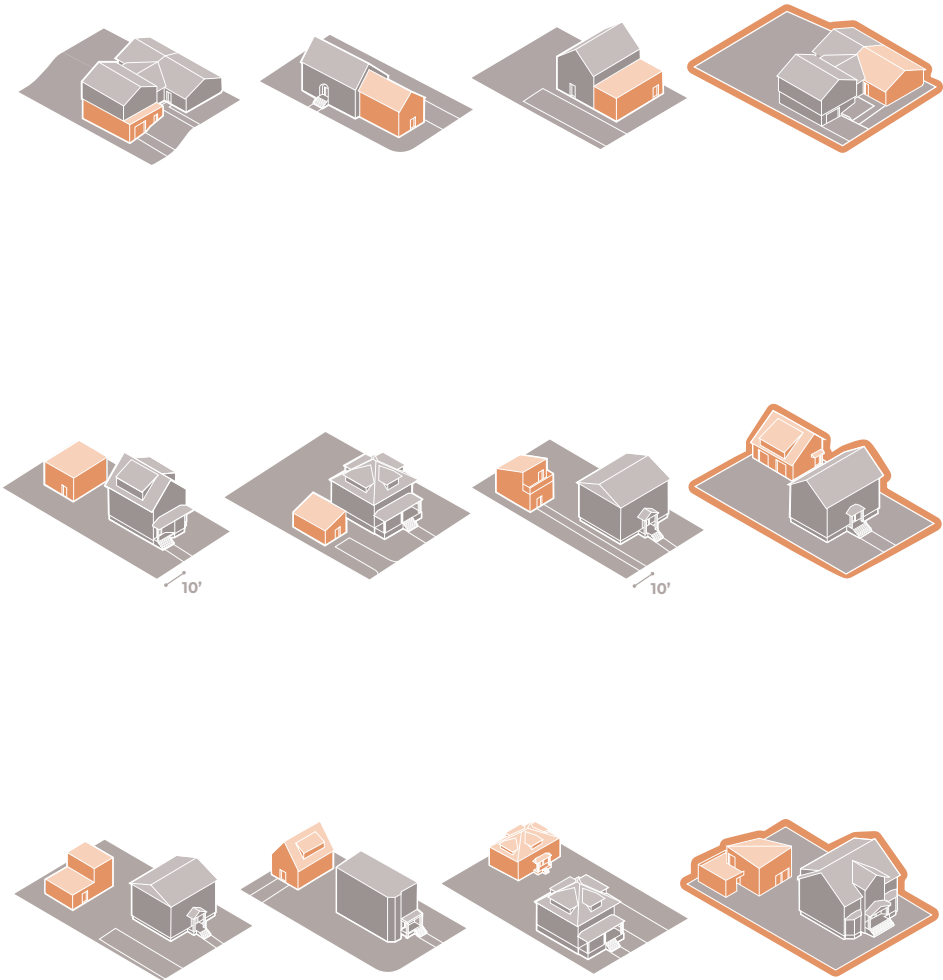




# LARGER LOTS

*There's a lot to mow in the front, side, and rear!*







## **ATTACH AN ADU IN YOUR FRONT YARD**

**115**

*I have a larger lot, and I want to build an ADU without obstructing any of my backyard.*

## **BUILD A MID-SIZED ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD**

**121**

*My lot has enough width on the sides or space in the backyard, and I want to build a detached ADU with one to two bedrooms.*

## **BUILD A LARGE ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD**

**131**

*My lot is large, with lots of space to the sides and back. I want to add an ADU that can house several people.*



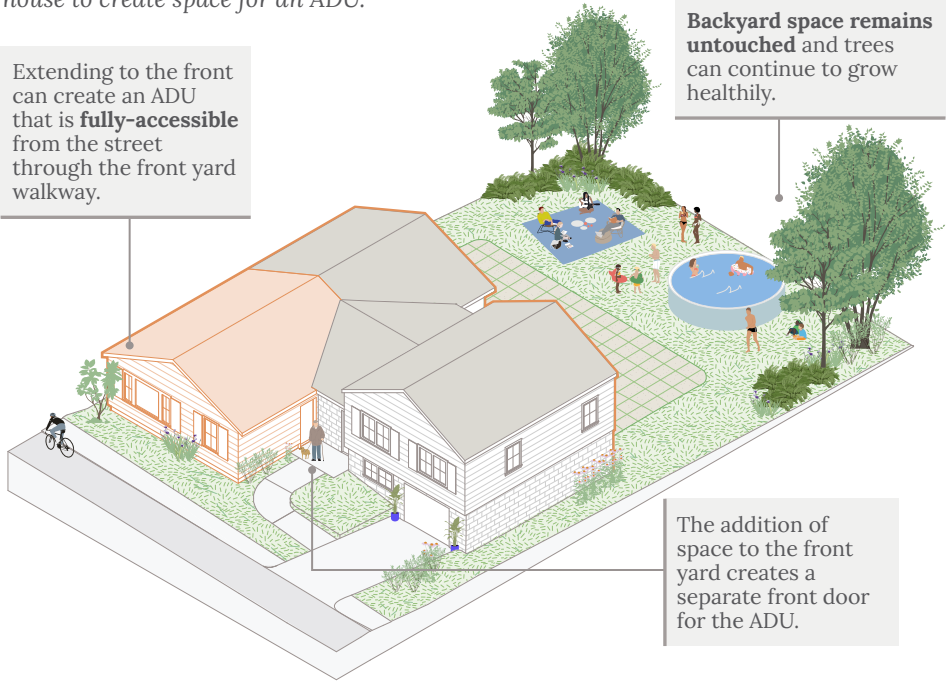
# ATTACH AN ADU IN YOUR FRONT YARD



Do you have extra space in your front yard? Consider extending the front of your house to create space for an ADU.

Extending to the front can create an ADU that is **fully-accessible** from the street through the front yard walkway.

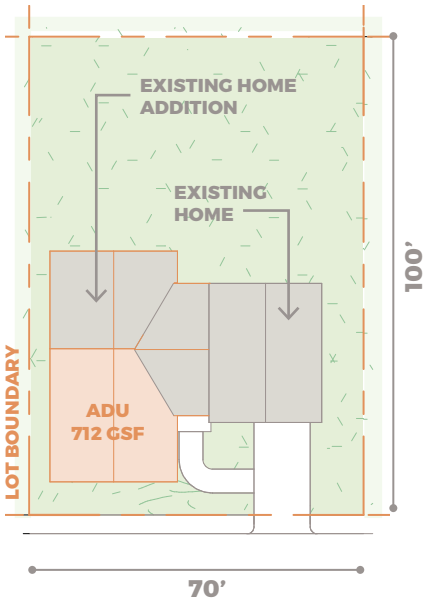
Backyard space remains **untouched** and trees can continue to grow healthily.



The addition of space to the front yard creates a separate front door for the ADU.

In this design, we are showing an ADU that shares a front yard walkway with the existing house, but has its own front door. Since the ADU is close to the street and is part of a home with only two units, sprinklers are not required. This design is illustrating a fully-accessible ADU, but the same approach could be used for an ADU that is not accessible.

Attaching an ADU on a larger lot can be an excellent way to provide living space for a family member or to generate rental income while minimizing impact to the backyard. It also leaves plenty of space for existing and new trees and plants to thrive.

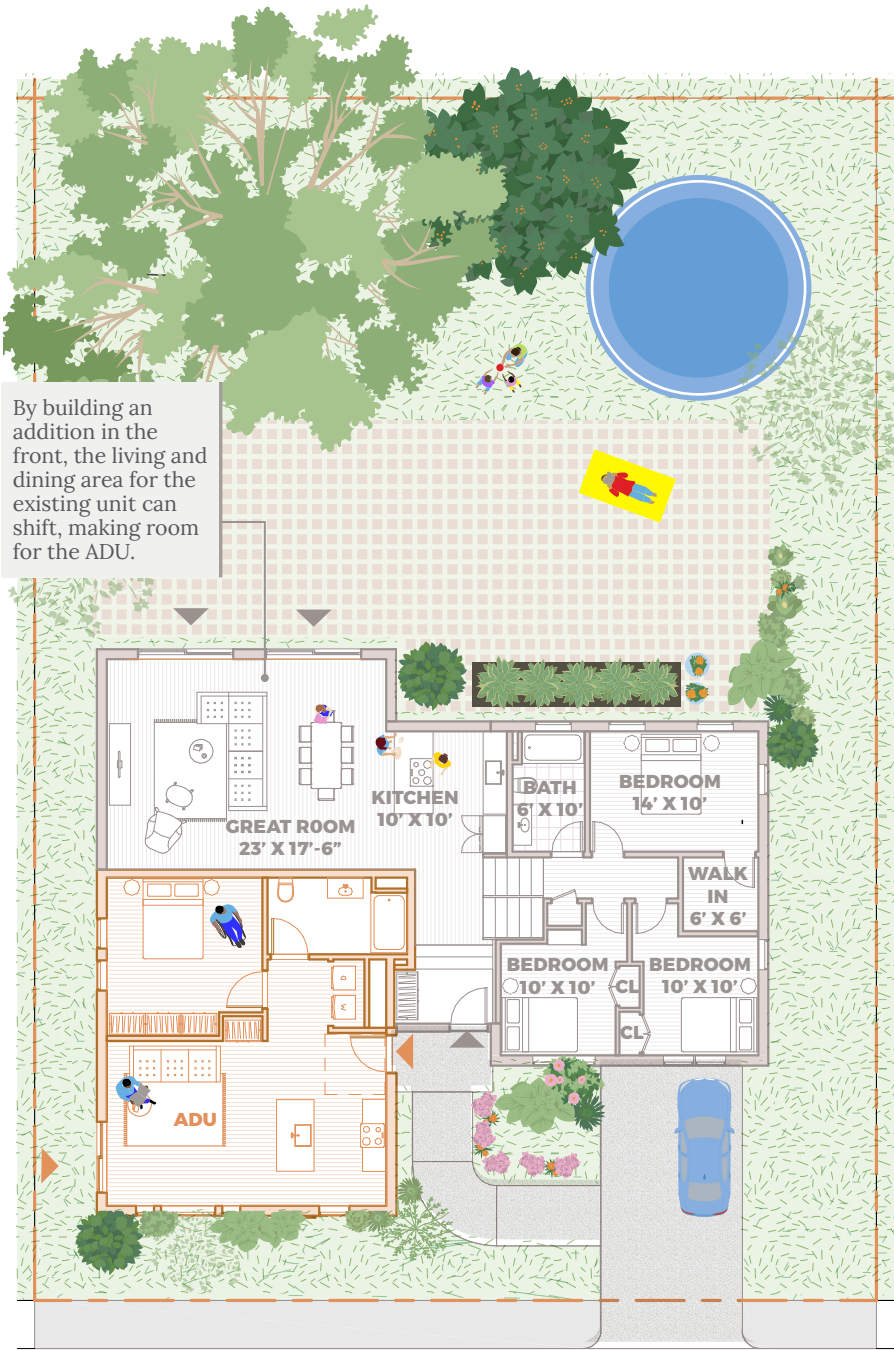




**VIEW FROM THE STREET: EXISTING HOUSE**



**VIEW FROM THE STREET: EXISTING HOUSE WITH ADU AND ADDITION**



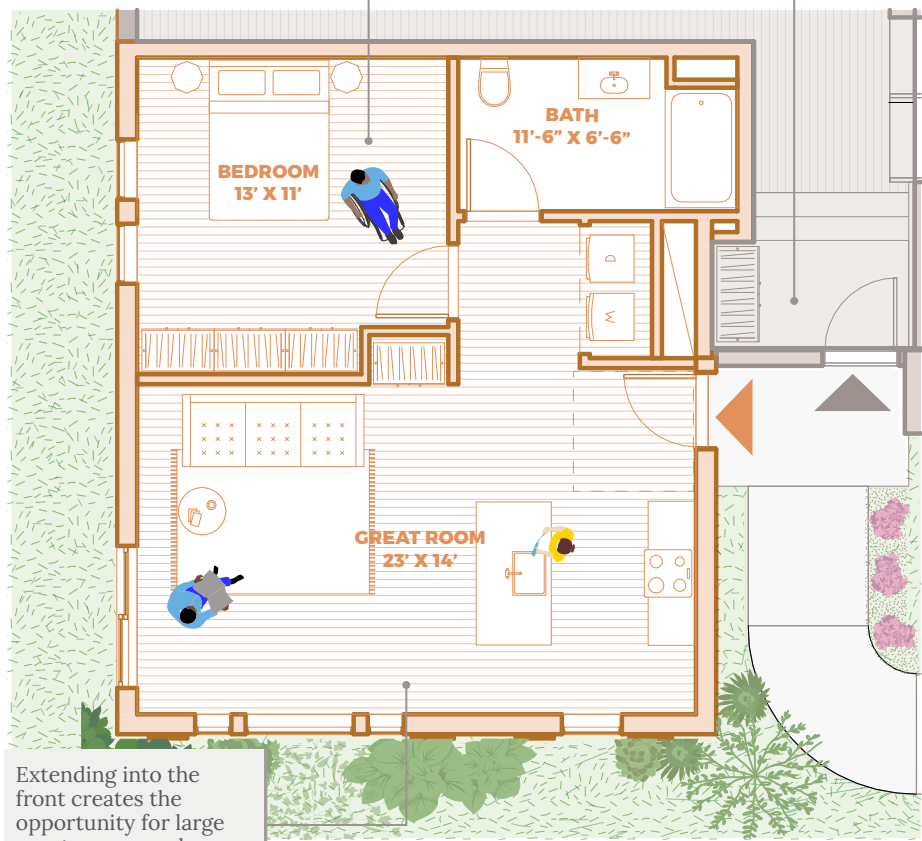
FIRST FLOOR: EXISTING HOUSE AND ADU ADDITION

1/16" = 1'-0"

This owner wanted to create an ADU that was large enough to fit one of their family members and their household, but wanted to maintain the current size and condition of their backyard.

Bedroom space is wide enough for comfortable movement of a wheelchair.

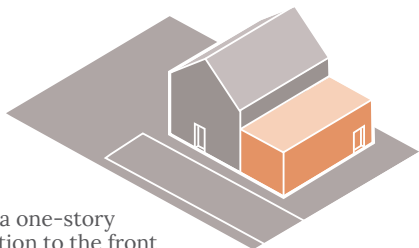
Separate doors for the main unit and the ADU maximize privacy.



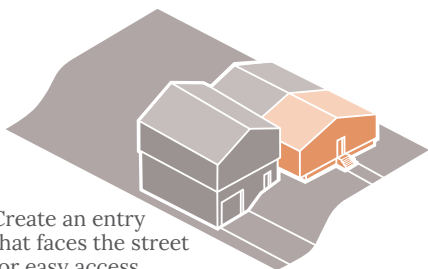
Extending into the front creates the opportunity for large **great rooms** such as the one shown here.

# MORE WAYS TO ATTACH AN ADU IN YOUR FRONT YARD

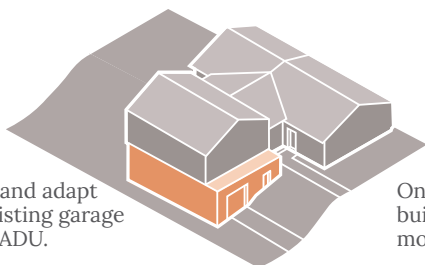
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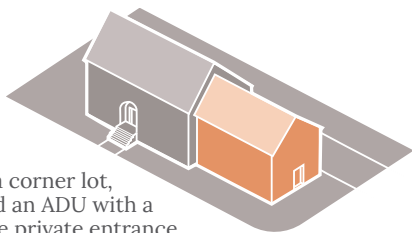
Add a one-story addition to the front of your home.



Create an entry that faces the street for easy access.



Extend and adapt your existing garage into an ADU.



On a corner lot, build an ADU with a more private entrance.

**Attaching an ADU to your front yard gives the new unit direct access to the street and sidewalk.** The entrance to the ADU could be positioned on the side of the ADU for added privacy or directly facing the street for easy access. Alternatively, the entrance could be tucked around a corner or recessed slightly, creating a more private entryway that still benefits from the convenience of street access.

As shown in the previous pages, the proximity to the street or to an existing driveway could make this a good approach if a homeowner has a large front yard and would like to add a fully accessible ADU. This arrangement could also be a great approach for multi-generational living.

This same approach is also possible in a side yard or rear yard. It is important to check zoning's yard requirements and understand the patterns of the yards in your area before you start this kind of project.



Homes built in the mid-twentieth century often feature large front yards and larger lots that offer possibilities for adding an ADU, as can be seen in this Allston home.



The oversized front yard in this house in Mattapan would be a great place to both add an ADU and more trees.



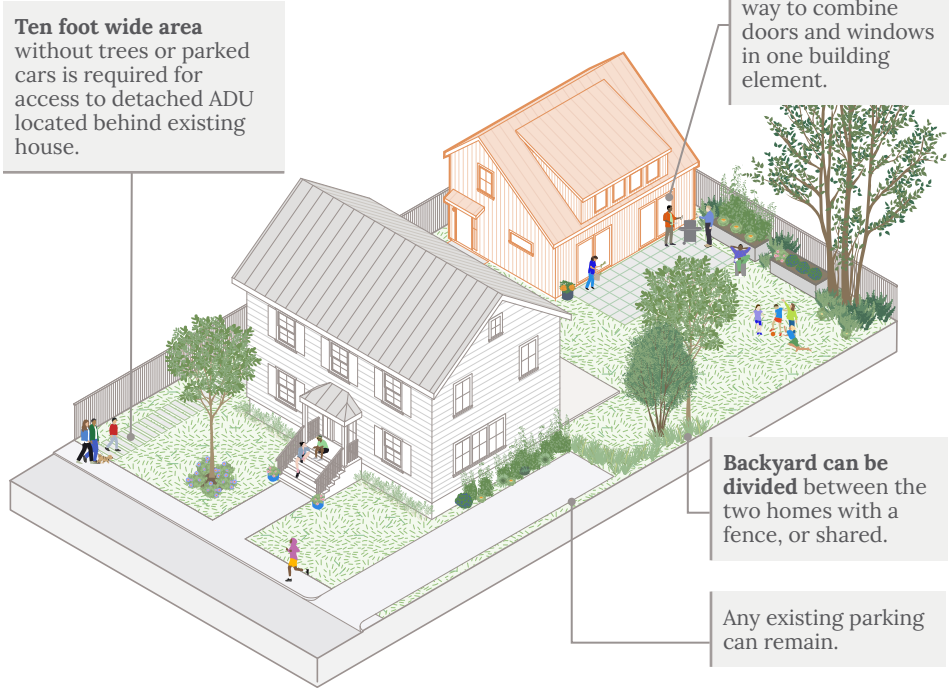
Enclosing an existing front porch, similar to this house in Roslindale, is also a way to add space to either the main unit or a new ADU.



# BUILD A MID-SIZED ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD

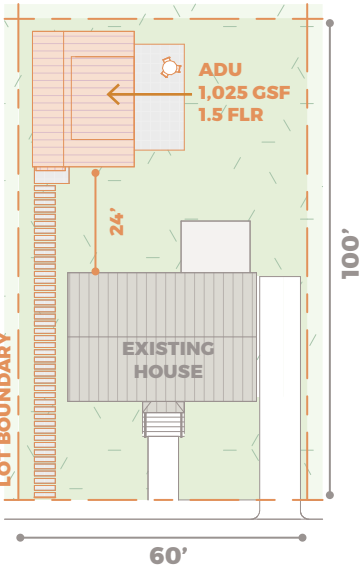


Do you have a good sized backyard? Consider building a new “tiny house” or prefabricated ADU.



**This detached, new build ADU is a 1.5 story, 1,025 square foot standalone cottage.** It is suitable for a small household with one or two occupants. The version shown utilizes a saltbox style roof and large dormer on one side of the roof facing the backyard.

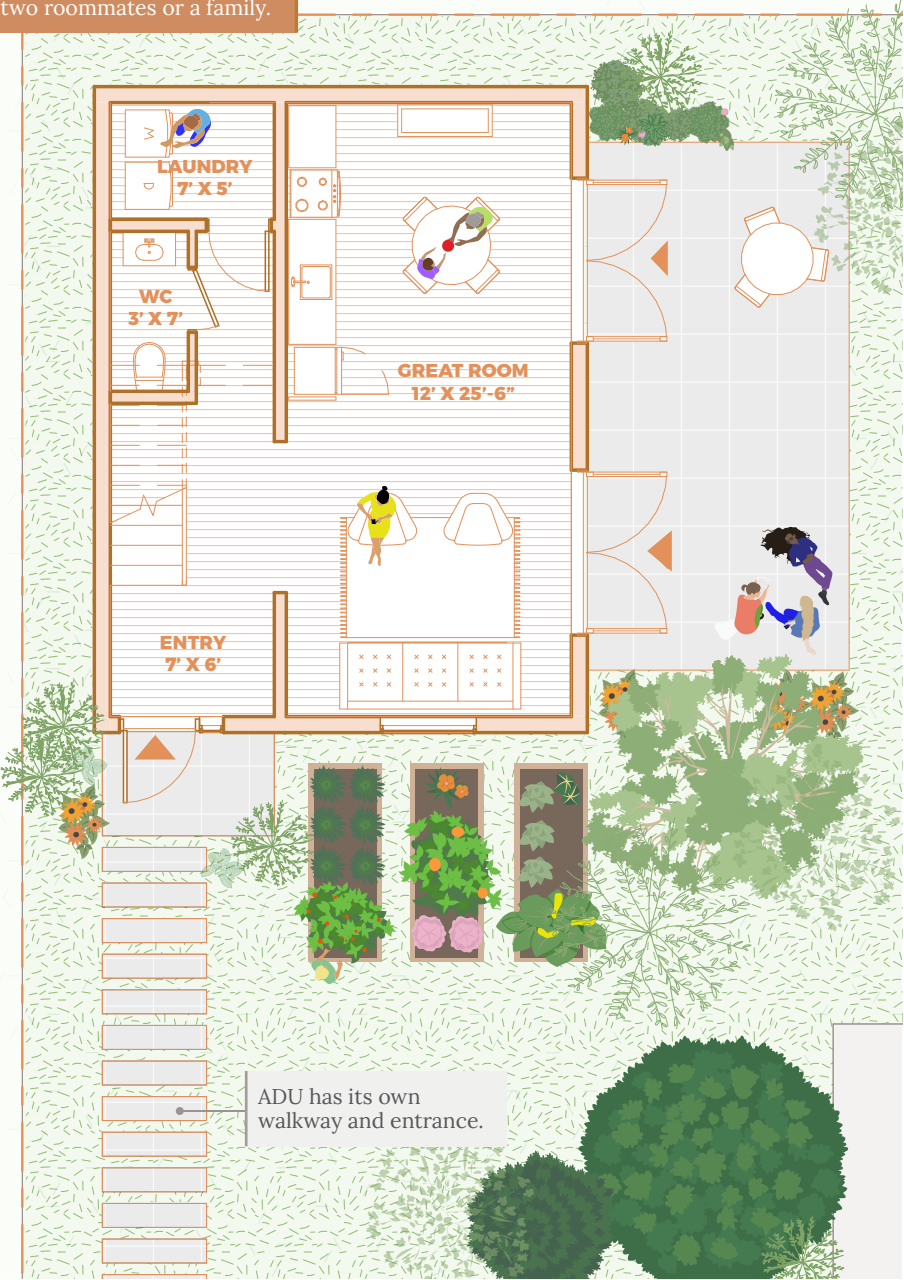
The ADU is positioned so the backyard could be divided into two separate spaces or used in common by both homes. A minimum 10-foot-wide fire access path is maintained on one side of the house, unencumbered by parked cars, so that the fire department can access the ADU in the event of an emergency. Because of the distance from the public right of way, the ADU will require sprinklers.

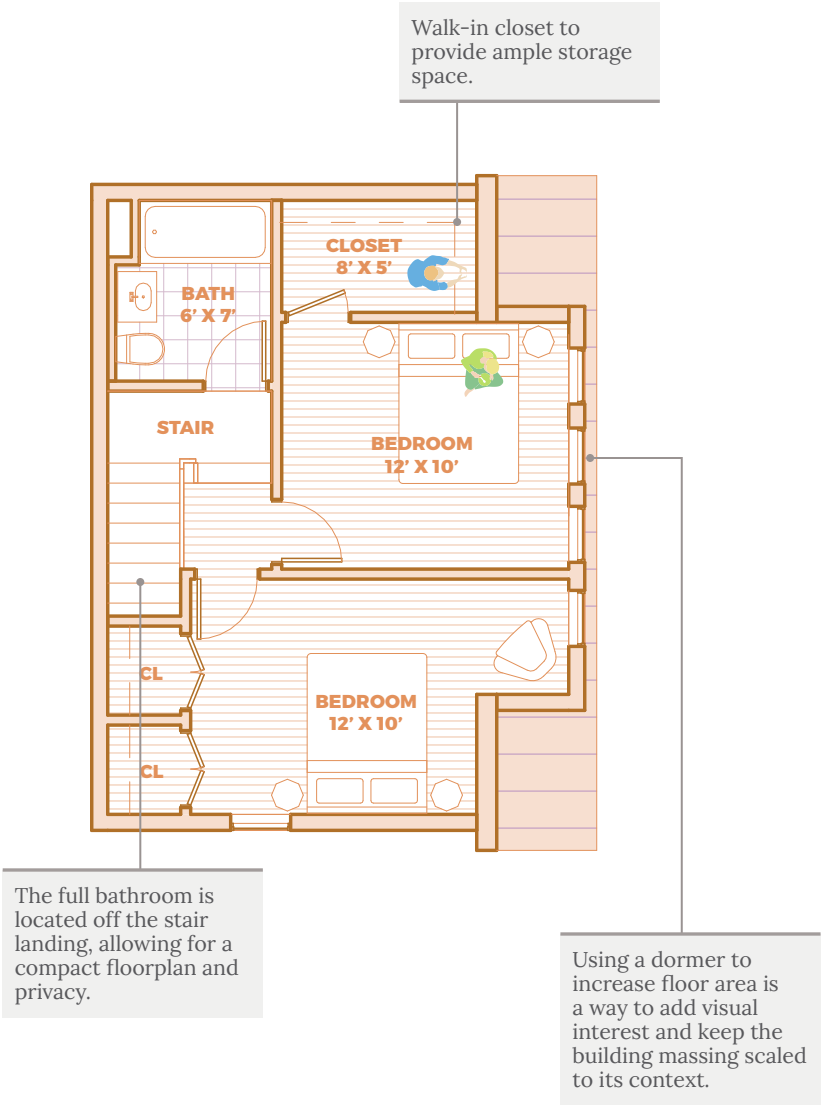






This owner is seeking a means of additional income, and wants to build an ADU that is large enough to rent to a pair of roommates or a family.









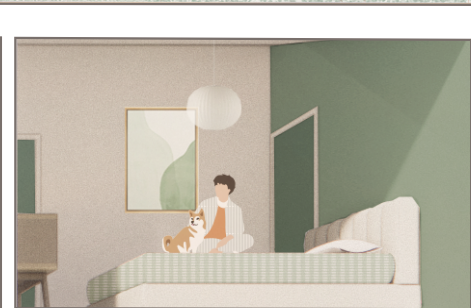




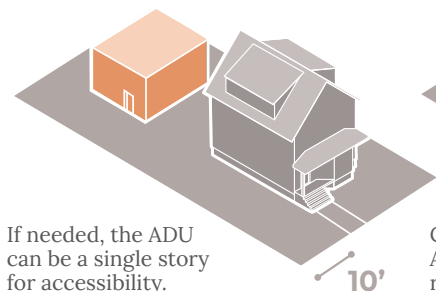
With the extra lot space between the main unit and the ADU, additional outdoor programs, such as **garden boxes**, can be included.



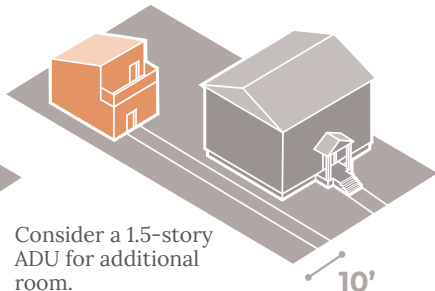




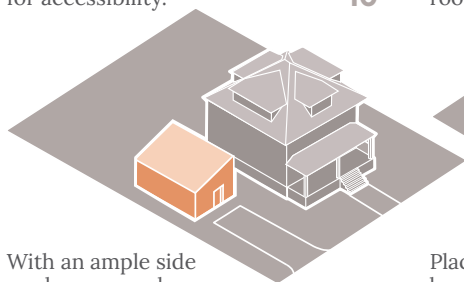
# MORE WAYS TO BUILD A MID-SIZED ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD



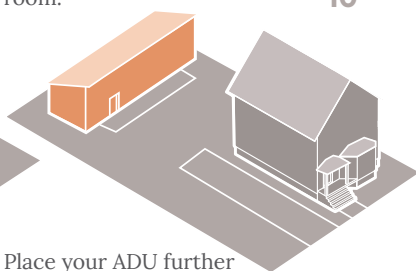
If needed, the ADU can be a single story for accessibility.



Consider a 1.5-story ADU for additional room.



With an ample side yard, you can place your ADU next to the home and street.



Place your ADU further back on the lot for a greater sense of privacy and a larger yard.

**A detached ADU in the backyard can come in many different sizes and shapes.** Start by thinking about the best spot for your backyard ADU, making sure you can create a ten-foot-wide access path for fire safety and avoid disturbing any existing trees. Once you have identified the ideal spot, you can explore different design alternatives with your architect or find inspiration from other ADUs that better suit your needs. This type of ADU may also be possible in your side yard if it is large enough.

A modular ADU could be a great option for this design, offering flexibility and efficiency in the building process. Some common prefabricated or modular ADUs include studio units, one-bedroom layouts, and even two-bedroom designs. These modular options can be customized to fit your space and needs, often with quicker installation times compared to traditional construction.



Mid-sized accessory buildings are already found in many parts of Boston.



In this example of a one-story ADU on a large lot, the glass doors and sidelites function both for egress and access to light and air.



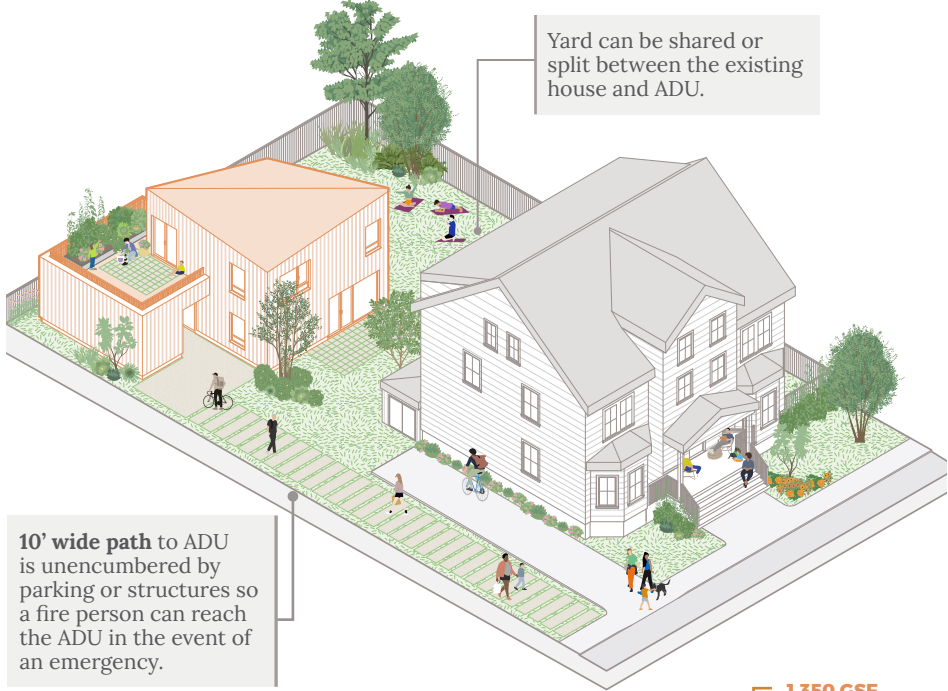
Since a detached ADU will only need to comply with the residential code, it can sometimes be smaller than internal or attached ADUs added to two- or three-unit buildings. (image: Perry Builders)



# BUILD A LARGE ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD

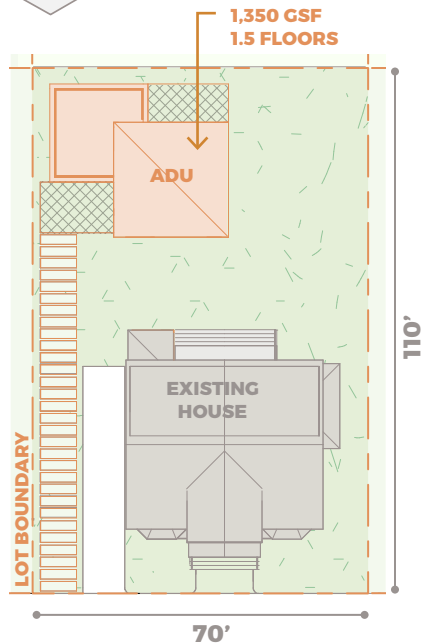


Put your backyard to work! As long as you have the space, you can put a standalone unit behind your main structure.



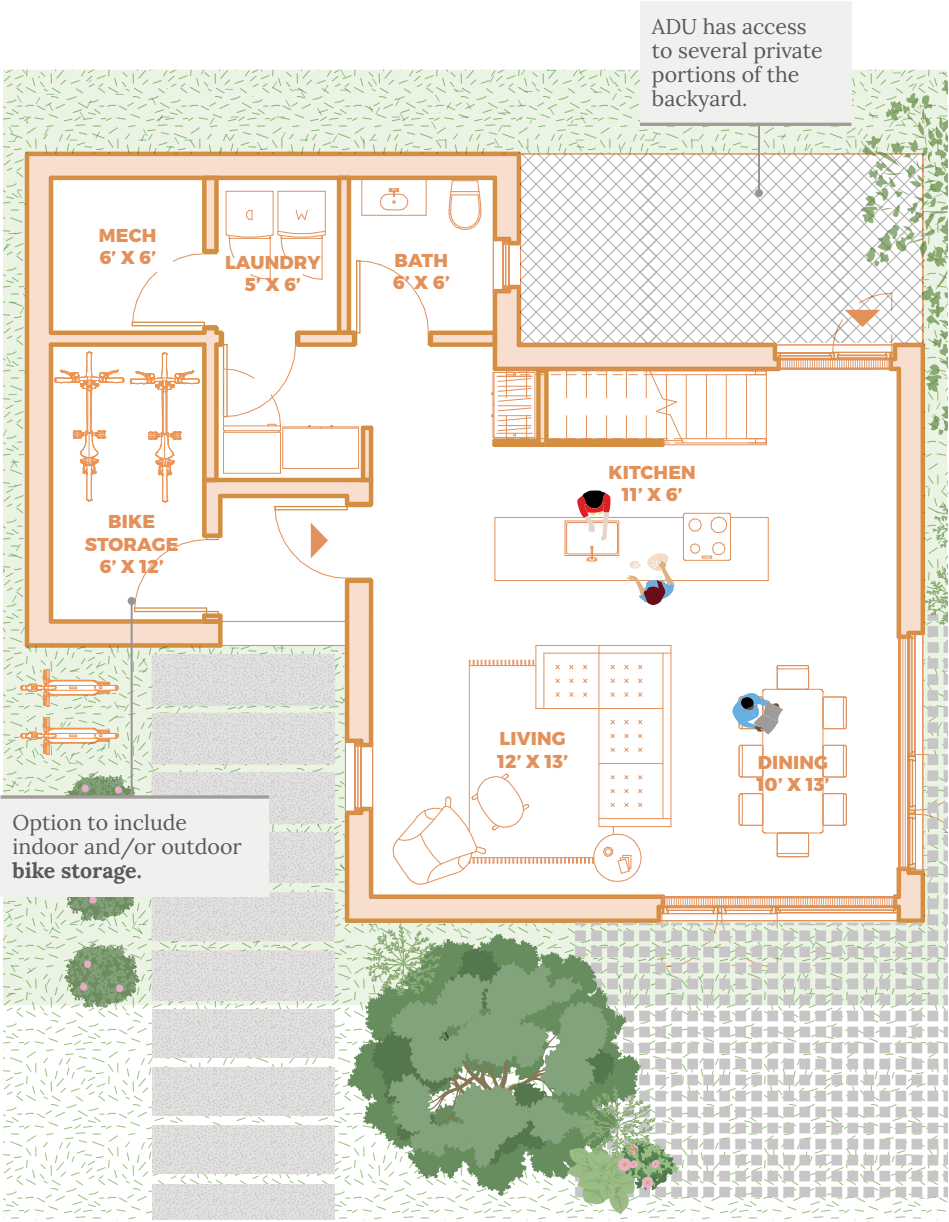
The scheme illustrated here is **1,350 gross square feet over one and a half floors**. It would work well for a family or for multiple roommates living together. This design incorporates a roof deck and garden as well as space for bicycle parking. The ADU has two bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, and a direct connection to a private yard and to the shared yard.

As with the smaller detached scheme shown before this one, having a detached ADU sited behind an existing house and more than twenty-five feet from the public right of way triggers the requirement for a ten foot wide area without trees or parked cars to allow emergency access to the ADU and also for the ADU to be sprinklered.



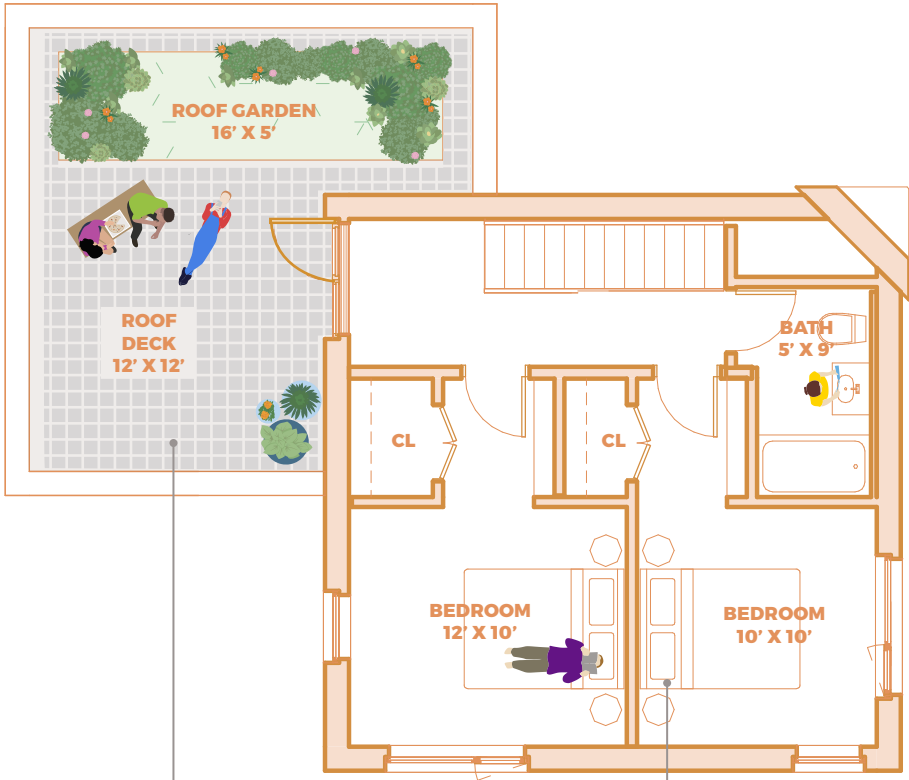








Currently, this owner has family who are looking for a space to rent. They have enough space in their backyard to build a large ADU that would comfortably fit them.



This particular design includes a flat roof over part of the first story that allows for a **roof deck** on top. You can add a roof garden, or another program of your choosing. If preferred, you could also do a pitched roof instead.

An ADU of this size is able to create **two larger bedrooms**, which will suit larger households. Each bedroom also has access to a large closet.







ADU has space for a private deck and a large portion of the backyard, which tends to be ideal for **large households**.

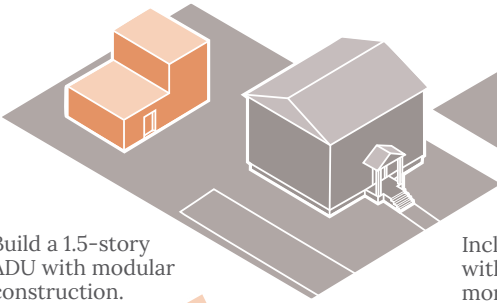




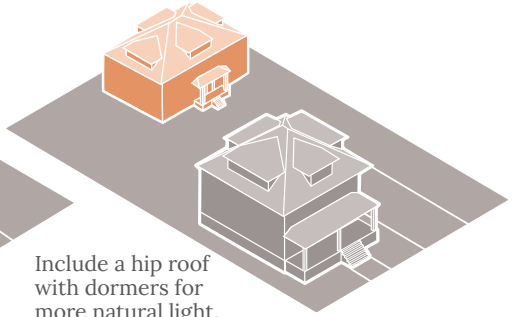


# MORE WAYS TO BUILD A LARGE ADU IN YOUR BACKYARD

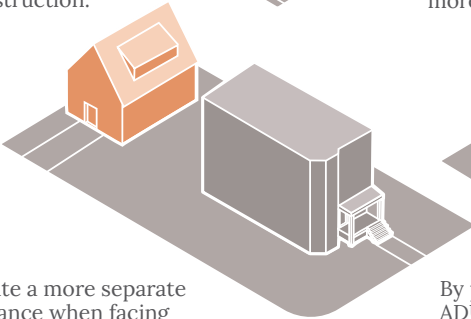
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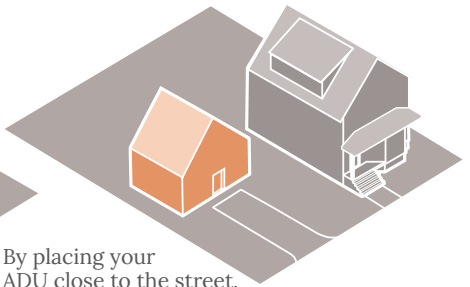
Build a 1.5-story ADU with modular construction.



Include a hip roof with dormers for more natural light.



Create a more separate entrance when facing a different street from the main unit.



By placing your ADU close to the street, you can create an accessible, separate entrance.

**The ADU shown on the last few pages features a very shallow pitched roof over a half-story for the second floor.** A more typical half story is done with a simple gable roof that is the same size as the building's footprint. Alternatively, you could do a hip roof with dormers. The style of the roof can match the main building or be an opportunity to try something new.

Modular construction is also a viable option if you are building a detached ADU. You will want to make sure to budget for site work, connecting utilities and hiring design professionals to assist in specifying the modular house that will be code-compliant on your lot and meet your programmatic needs. This approach may streamline the construction process and reduce on-site building time.

This West Roxbury detached ADU manages to be large while clearly being accessory to the principal structure and smaller than other homes nearby.



This 1,350 square foot ADU in Cambridge is an example of the largest size ADU allowed in the existing ADU zoning for Mattapan. (Architect and photo: Hubert Murray)



Modular construction still has some challenges on Boston's tight sites, but in some cases it can be a more cost effective and efficient path for building an ADU.









# LEARN MORE



# HOW TO BUILD YOUR ADU

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Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) involves translating your housing goals into a new home that is legal, safe, beautiful, and functional. Property owners will go through a five-step process to **learn** about ADUs, **plan** their unique design, **permit** the project through City processes, **build** the new structure or renovation, and **move** themselves or others into their ADU. Along the way, property owners should expect to work with architects, engineers, and contractors to bring a project from idea to execution.

**STEP 1:  
LEARN**

**STEP 2:  
PLAN**

**STEP 3:  
PERMIT**

**STEP 4:  
BUILD**

**STEP 5:  
MOVE IN**

## STEP 1: LEARN

### A. Determine your ADU goals.

Do you need to house an aging parent? Would you like to move into the ADU and rent out the rest of your home? Your goals for the ADU will help determine how large it should be. Before design starts, you will meet with your architect to discuss your space needs, sustainability and/or accessibility priorities, and goals for the look and feel of the project. You can start looking for an architect or designer by visiting the websites for the [Boston Society of Architects](#) and the [Boston Chapter of the National Organization of Minority Architects](#).

### B. Assess the regulations.

Review the zoning district regulations that apply to your property. An ADU may be allowed by zoning or may (until zoning is updated) require zoning relief from the Zoning Board of Appeal. Determine if your home is within a Historic District or in a flood-vulnerable area, which may further regulate ADU development on your property. Contact the Planning Department (<https://www.bostonplans.org/about-us/contact-us>) with any questions you have about the applicable regulations.

### C. Begin thinking about design.

Explore potential ADU designs through this Guidebook, especially those that pair well with your existing property. Start an ideas board with photos of homes you've visited or through a website with online photos. Having a sense of the look and feel that appeals to you will help guide the design process.

## STEP 2: PLAN

### A. Establish an ADU budget.

Meet with an architect or builder to get an initial sense of how much your project will cost. Work with a financial advisor to determine what funding options may be right for you. Engage with lenders to get pre-approval for a loan or line of credit if necessary. (See “Financing an ADU” on page 161 for more information.) Work with an advisor to understand when different sums of money will be needed (such as money that will



be needed for design versus that needed for each phase of construction). Contact the [Mayor's Office of Housing](#) via email ([ADU@boston.gov](mailto:ADU@boston.gov)) with any questions or concerns you have at this stage or any other stage of the process.

## **B. Meet with a design professional.**

If your project is small, you can likely work with either an interior designer or an architect. Depending on the scale and complexity of the project, you will need a licensed architect who can officially stamp the construction documents. Your design professional will help you determine the overall design team, which could include a structural engineer, landscape architect, or civil engineer. Your design professional will also recommend site testing, surveying, and existing conditions drawings if necessary.

## **C. Start designing!**

We support using the designs given in this guidebook as much as possible, but we cannot pre-approve plans, since your property's ADU design will depend on your specific lot and structure. If you know exactly what you want for your ADU, your architect may only draw one design. Typically, an architect will start a "Schematic Design" process by developing two to three designs based on your program needs and design priorities. Once you have selected a preferred design, the architect will develop a Schematic Design drawing set that can be used for preliminary competitive bidding by builders. After receiving an initial bid, there may be adjustments to the design to meet your budget. You may also select a builder at this time so they can give feedback during the remainder of the design process.

## STEP 3: PERMIT

### A. Initiate the approvals processes.

Your project will need zoning approval to proceed. Depending on your property, you may also need review by the Boston Landmarks Commission, Conservation Commission, or Parks and Recreation Commission. Learn more about applicable regulations in “ADU Regulations and Guidelines” on page 149. Your architect will likely start these approval processes with the Schematic Design. If you think you will need a zoning variance from the Zoning Board of Appeal, which, as of 2024, is the case for most attached and detached ADU designs in most areas of Boston), you should meet with the Planning Department to confirm. You can contact us through our website (<https://www.bostonplans.org/about-us/contact-us>). If you think you will need to go through a Landmarks Commission ([BLC@boston.gov](mailto:BLC@boston.gov)), Conservation Commission ([CC@boston.gov](mailto:CC@boston.gov)), or Parks and Recreation Commission ([prc@boston.gov](mailto:prc@boston.gov)) review, you will also want to start those processes early.

### B. Update cost estimates.

Your builder will update their estimate with the drawing set that will be used for permitting. You will typically sign a contract with the builder at this point and switch from working primarily with your architect to working primarily with your builder. The builder will provide the estimated cost of the project when paying permit fees to the city. The final estimate is also what you should use to determine total requests for construction loans or other financing.

### C. Submit an application to ISD.

Your builder will submit a set of permit drawings and application materials to the City of Boston's Inspectional Services Department (ISD). ISD will review the proposal for conformance to the Building Code, the Zoning Ordinance, and other regulations. Depending on the

details of the project, ISD may respond with a refusal letter, due to noncompliance with the building code or zoning nonconformity. ISD may also approve the project if it conforms to the Zoning Ordinance, Building Code, and other regulations.

**D. Seek a zoning variance if needed.**

If the proposal is refused due to zoning, your architect or builder can assist in submitting an appeal to the City of Boston Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). The ZBA inspects and reviews buildings for zoning compliance. The Office of Neighborhood Services will host an abutter's meeting. The ZBA will hold one or more public hearings on the appeal and vote to approve the project (with or without conditions) or to deny the project. If everything checks out, your builder will be issued a Building Permit after a final code compliance review by ISD.

## **STEP 4: BUILD**

**A. Access construction funds.**

Based on your financial planning undertaken in *Step 2: Plan*, pull funds together (whether cash on hand or debt) to pay for construction of the ADU.

**B. Monitor construction.**

The builder will manage the construction process. The architect will observe construction and meet with the builder. Meet regularly with both to review progress, monitor the budget, and approve changes as needed.

## **STEP 5: MOVE IN**

- A. After a final construction inspection, the occupants of your ADU can move in. If you plan to rent your ADU, you will now be a landlord. As a housing provider, you should become familiar with your responsibilities and with Boston's rental regulations, including [rental registration](#) with ISD.

# ADU REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES

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Building an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) — like with any building — requires consideration of several regulations before the project is approved. This section provides a brief overview of some major and minor regulations that property owners must follow, as well as other considerations for ADU design.

## **BUILDING CODE, FIRE CODE, AND RELATED LAWS**

The safety of Boston's buildings and people within them is regulated by a group of state and local laws implemented. These codes sometimes overlap and regulate the same ideas. In those cases, the strictest regulation will apply. As a homeowner pursuing an ADU, you will rely on an architect (and consultants they may hire) to understand these laws and design within them. Most decisions related to the Building Code, Fire Code, and related laws will not be noticeable to people not professionally involved in development. However, these codes can mandate certain high-cost building systems, like sprinkler systems or additional exit routes, that are a major financial consideration for homeowners.

### **Building Code**

The [Massachusetts State Building Code](#) is an implementation of international building safety standards, amended to meet the needs of the Commonwealth.



These codes cover a great deal of building issues, such as materials, construction techniques, room size requirements, egress (exit) standards, and much more. The Building Code is codified as 780 CMR (Code of Massachusetts Regulations), and comes in two variants. The International Residential Code (IRC, or Residential Volume) applies to single-unit structures, two-unit structures, townhouses with three stories or less, and accessory structures. The International Building Code (IBC, or Base Volume) applies to all buildings not covered by the IRC, including three- and four-unit structures. Depending on your existing building, the ADU configuration you want to build, and other factors, your ADU will either need to follow the IRC or the IBC. In general, IRC regulations are easier and less expensive to achieve than IBC regulations. The City of Boston's [Inspectional Services Department](#) enforces the Building Code at the local level through permit application review and construction inspections.



An aerial view of Jamaica Plain.

*“I would love to see clear guidelines I can follow so I can convert my garage to a dwelling for my elderly father on a predictable budget and timeline — and before he is too frail to move him here.”*

**STEPHANIE • JAMAICA PLAIN**

### Fire Code

The [Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code](#), codified as 527 CMR, specifies statewide requirements for buildings and infrastructure related to fire prevention and mitigation. In the case of ADUs, some of the most relevant provisions in these laws include distance of each residential structure to the street, the width and configuration of fire access, and sprinkler system requirements. The Boston Fire Department's [Bureau of Fire Prevention](#) enforces the Fire Code locally through permit application review and construction inspections. See the City of Boston's [Guidance on ADUs and Fire Safety](#) document for more information.

### Other Regulations

Beyond the Building and Fire Codes, there are other laws and regulations related to life safety in residential construction. For instance, sprinkler systems are also regulated by state-level statute, and the absolute minimum standards for health and safety in human habitation are covered by the sanitary code.



A home in Jamaica Plain.

*"I have a big attic and a two-car garage that I would love to turn into a unit for my son and his family."*

**BLANCA** • WEST ROXBURY



An aerial view of Roslindale and the Arnold Arboretum.

*“I would love to see more multigenerational homes. My heart broke when my 90-plus-year-old neighbors had to move from their home of 55+ years to Natick. If they had made an ADU in the cellar, they could have lived comfortably with one of their kids living upstairs. I would like to build an ADU for my adult children now, and then switch spots when stairs aren't feasible for me.”*

**ELAINE** • BRIGHTON



## ZONING

Zoning is a set of laws that dictates what can or can't be built in a city and where. In Boston, zoning controls things like the types of activities allowed on a lot (uses), how many units a building can have (density), dimensional factors like the required distance between the building and the lot lines, building height, off-street parking, and other design elements. Right now, 98% of small-scale residential properties in Boston have zoning that will prohibit them from building an ADU (or even from building the current house). Many of the designs in this guidebook will require homeowners to seek zoning relief from the Board of Appeal to build them. The City of Boston is working to create new residential zoning that matches the City's small-scale residential fabric and allows ADUs. Refer to Boston's [zoning viewer](#) for an interactive map of zoning districts. For more information on zoning boundaries and requirements, contact the [Planning and Zoning Division](#) of the Planning Department ([planningzoningqs@boston.gov](mailto:planningzoningqs@boston.gov)).

### Neighborhood Design Overlay Districts

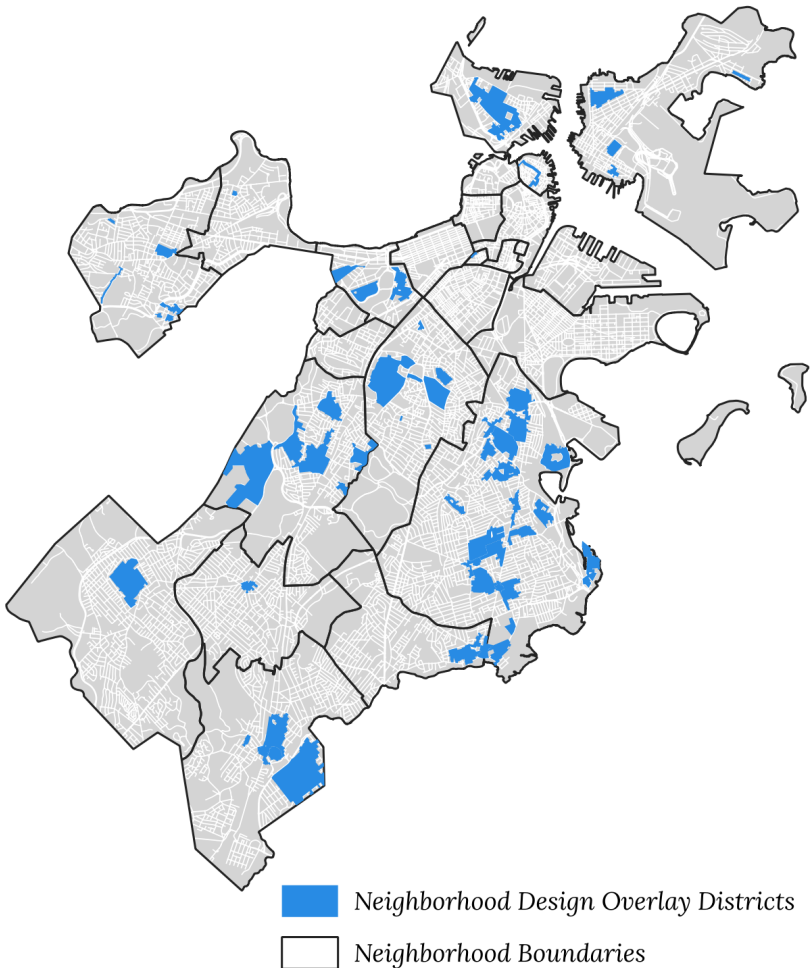
Several areas of Boston have areas called Neighborhood Design Overlay Districts (NDODs) that require a notification process and design review for projects that involve exterior alterations such as changes to the roof shape, cornice line, building height, or height of the street-facing wall, building massing, size and location of doors and windows, buildings or additions of 300 square feet or more in gross floor area. There are 53 NDODs across the city, covering significant portions of neighborhoods like Charlestown, Dorchester, East Boston, Fenway, Hyde Park, Jamaica Plain, and Roxbury. Refer to Boston's [zoning viewer](#) for an interactive map of NDOD areas.

Certain types of ADU projects within NDODs may trigger this design review process, subject to the specific language for the zoning code for the NDOD it is located in. You can consult the [Boston Zoning Code](#) for detailed information or contact the [Planning and Zoning Division](#) ([planningzoningqs@boston.gov](mailto:planningzoningqs@boston.gov)).



## HISTORIC DISTRICTS

The City of Boston has 10 historic districts designated by the Boston Landmarks Commission. Within these areas, additional regulations control how property owners design new buildings or major renovations, especially those that impact the exterior of buildings. In each Historic District,



a commission specific to that district reviews proposals and can approve or deny projects. The districts (which have specific boundaries mapped by the City) include the following:

- Aberdeen, Brighton
- Back Bay
- Bay State Road/Back Bay West
- Bay Village
- Beacon Hill
- Fort Point Channel, South Boston
- Mission Hill Triangle
- South End
- St. Botolph Area, East Fenway
- Highland Park, Roxbury

Contact the [Boston Landmarks Commission](#) ([BLC@boston.gov](mailto:BLC@boston.gov)) for questions about the historic districts.

## PARKS COMMISSION REVIEW

Under City of Boston Ordinance 7-4.11, the construction or alteration of a building within 100 feet of a park or parkway requires the approval of the Boston Parks and Recreation Commission prior to the issuance of building permits. Contact the [Parks and Recreation Commission](#) ([prc@boston.gov](mailto:prc@boston.gov)) for more information.



**Top:** An aerial view of the South End.



**Left:** A rowhome in Mission Hill.

## BUILDING ENERGY CODE

Boston has recently opted into Massachusetts' "Specialized Energy Code" for new construction and major renovations, such as the development of ADUs. This Specialized Code implements the policy of net zero greenhouse gas emissions from building operations, by requiring high levels of energy efficiency and using clean energy.

ADU developments can meet the specialized code requirements by using (1) net zero energy and pre-wiring all appliances for electrification, (2) using all-electric energy sources (i.e., avoiding fossil fuels altogether), or (3) using a mix of electric and fossil fuel sources, but pre-wiring for electrification and installing solar panels where feasible. The new energy code is both an important step forward for Boston and a potential driver of costs that must be considered in ADU projects.

## ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility for people with disabilities is a driving factor among many people interested in ADUs. Often, property owners considering ADUs may be owner-occupants looking for an accessible apartment to age within, or they are people looking to house aging relatives. ADUs may also be used to provide housing for live-in homecare providers, such as nurses, health care aides, PCAs, physical therapists, and others. When thinking of building an ADU, homeowners should consider that accessibility is a spectrum.

- A "visitable" unit can be easily visited by someone using a wheelchair. As defined by the Fair Housing Act Design Manual, a visitable home would feature a zero-step entrance, door widths with sufficient wheelchair clearance, and a wheelchair-accessible ground floor bathroom.
- "Adaptable" units are built to easily transition to accessible units if needed. They may have removable base cabinets and reinforced walls at key locations for the installation of grab bars.





An aerial view of Roslindale.

- More accessibility features include turning space that accommodates wheelchairs, accessible room thresholds, lower cabinets and shelving, wheelchair-aligned outlets, etc.
- There are also features for sensory disabilities such as auxiliary visual alarms, which provide a visual alert for fire alarms, visual notification devices for doorbells, adjustable lighting, etc.
- Because there are many uses for ADUs, using Universal Design principles when constructing ADUs can ensure the unit is usable to the greatest extent possible by all users regardless of their age, size, or disability. “Universal Design” is an accessibility paradigm that promotes designing for all potential users. This approach has been described in guides like the [Standards for Universally Accessible Homes](#).

Fair Housing laws at the federal, state, and local levels make discrimination on the basis of disability illegal. This includes making reasonable modifications so that people with disabilities have full enjoyment of the unit. Even if a property owner does not need to make an accessible unit, it would be wise for ADU designs to be easily adaptable to meet this reasonable modification requirement.

State building code (521 CMR) has specific accessibility requirements for buildings and facilities with three or more units. If the building already has three or more units, or constructing the ADU adds a third unit, these requirements may be applicable.

Accessibility features, like home elevators and lifts, may be eligible for the [Home Modification Loan Program](#). Veterans may also be eligible for grants to fund accessibility features. Other nonprofit and for-profit lenders offer grants or loans for accessibility features, independent of financing strategies for an ADU generally, which could also cover installation of accessibility features.

For more information on accessibility in ADUs, contact the [Mayor's Office of Housing \(housing@boston.gov\)](#) and/or the [City of Boston Disabilities Commission \(disability@boston.gov\)](#).



A triple-decker in Allston.

## FAIR HOUSING LAWS

Beyond accessibility and accommodation, Fair Housing laws at the federal, state, and local levels prohibit discrimination based on listed characteristics of a person or household engaging in the following activities: renting or buying a home, getting a mortgage, and seeking housing assistance. It is illegal to discriminate on demographic factors or household characteristics including, but are not limited to race, religion, age, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, family status, the presence of children, and military status. In most cases, these laws do not affect the design of the unit itself. However, property owners looking to add an ADU should be aware that building a unit for a specific demographic and attempting to select occupants based on their demographic characteristics is illegal. Contact the [Office of Fair Housing and Equity](#) ([fairhousing@boston.gov](mailto:fairhousing@boston.gov)) for more information.

## FLOODING

Flooding from extreme weather and storm surges are a serious concern as coastal cities like Boston deal with climate change. ADU projects within a FEMA flood zone, which are vulnerable to flooding today, will need to follow all rules for flood hazard zones. Properties in the Coastal Flood Resiliency Overlay District, which will be vulnerable in the future under conditions of sea level rise, will need to ensure the ADU is above the base flood elevation or sea level rise design flood elevation. As flooding becomes less predictable in climate change, ADU projects should take into account the potential impacts of stormwater flooding to an ADU, particularly to any areas below grade. Contact the Planning Department's [Planning and Zoning Division](#) ([planningzoningqs@boston.gov](mailto:planningzoningqs@boston.gov)) for more information on the Coastal Flood Resiliency Overlay District.

# FINANCING AN ADU

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Despite their small size, ADU construction can be expensive, especially for owner-occupants on a tight budget. Few property owners can pay entirely out-of-pocket for ADU design and construction. Most will need to get some sort of financing from a bank or other financial institution in order to build an ADU. Most likely, property owners will need a mix of cash and one or more financing sources to complete their ADU project. For ongoing updates on ADU financing, see Boston's [general ADU web page](#).

Each property is different and each owner has a unique financial situation. Homeowners should consider their own financial position and unique circumstances before proceeding, and may benefit from using financial advisory services. Nothing in this guidebook is intended as financial advice.

Some typical ADU financing strategies include the following. Each of these options has pros and cons, and each carries risks.

- **Boston Home Center's ADU Loan Program.** The City offers gap funding to eligible Boston homeowners of one- to three-unit properties who wish to build an ADU. The loan can fund interior improvements, additions, or detached structures to create an ADU. The loans are interest-free and offer funding up to \$50,000, covering costs not covered by cash or other loans. The loan



amount is determined by the estimated cost of the project. Borrowers make no monthly payments, and the balance does not become due until the owner sells, transfers ownership, or undertakes a cash-out refinance of the home. Households are eligible for this program if they earn no more than 135% of Area Median Income (as of 2024, roughly \$154,000 for a single-person household or \$176,000 for a two-person household) and meet other financial criteria.



Triple-decker homes in Roxbury.

*“Affordability appears to be an after thought during the last discussion. Let’s have ADU policy prioritize it beyond offering loans. It should inform ADU policies.”*

**GOLDMAN • JAMAICA PLAIN**



A South Boston streetscape.

*“I could build an ADU for my lifelong South Boston elderly parents. My parents are financially squeezed to the limit. An ADU for them would ease their fears and anxiety.”*

**JASON • SOUTH BOSTON**

- **Home Equity Loan.** Property owners who have accrued significant equity in their home (i.e., the value of their home subtracting what is owed on a mortgage) can take out a loan on that equity. For instance, if a couple has owned a home for 20 years and has been paying a standard 30-year mortgage in that time, they have likely gained significant home equity, due to both their mortgage payments and the appreciation in home values over the last 20 years. A home equity loan is a loan on that value, and like a mortgage, the home is used as collateral. Typically, home equity loans have fixed-rate payments with long repayment periods, and both principal and interest are repaid throughout the loan term. This can mean that initial repayments may be larger than other financing options, but payment amounts will be predictable.

- **Home Equity Line of Credit (HELOC).** Property owners with significant home equity in their home can also consider HELOCs. Like home equity loans, HELOCs tap into the value of a home (subtracting what is owed on a mortgage), but they are structured differently. HELOC borrowers can draw down their borrowed funds as needed (like a credit card), without taking on a big repayment up front. Homeowners who want to build ADUs but are unsure if their ADU will be permitted may find this advantageous. However, HELOC interest rates typically adjust based on prevailing interest rates, so there is a risk that payments on borrowed funds can increase. HELOC repayments also typically jump up after a number of years, as principal repayment is often deferred.
- **Cash-Out Mortgage Refinancing.** Property owners with a mortgage and significant equity can also choose to refinance their mortgage to put that equity to work building an ADU. This option is similar to home equity loans and HELOCs, but instead of additional secondary debt, a refinancing wipes out the primary mortgage and creates a new one. Mortgage refinancings typically offer better interest rates than home equity loans, but loan closing costs may be greater than other options. Mortgage refinancing was a popular strategy to make home improvements in previous decades. As of 2024, mortgage interest rates are much higher than they were in previous decades, and the new interest rates will apply to the entire mortgage value, not just the new equity. This potentially makes refinancing more costly and less attractive than other options, depending on one's unique circumstances.
- **Personal Loans.** Personal loans are loans based on a borrower's income and credit history, but that which don't use collateral to secure the loan. Compared to home equity loans or HELOCs, personal loans are usually smaller in size and have higher interest rates and fees. For these reasons, personal loans may be best suited to fill gaps in ADU funding if other options are not available.

# SPRINKLER AND FIRE ACCESS REQUIREMENT CHECKLISTS

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Two important and intertwined considerations for ADU projects are sprinkler and fire access requirements. Sprinklers are a significant cost for some ADU projects, and improper planning for fire access or sprinklering can delay ADU development. This subsection provides a detailed overview of the building and fire code nuances that property owners and architects will need to consider for their ADU. We hope this provides guidance to you as you plan for your ADU, but these pages are not a regulatory determination or hard rule for sprinklers or fire access. Every project is unique. An architect working on your project is best positioned to determine what is necessary to get a project permitted and ensure life safety.

See the City of Boston's [Guidance on ADUs and Fire Safety](#) to access a visual guide to sprinkler requirements for ADUs in Boston.



## WHAT CODE DOES MY ADU NEED TO ADHERE TO?

New construction and adaptive reuse projects are subject to many checks through municipal, state and nationally mandated laws that govern life safety in the built environment. As a homeowner pursuing an ADU, you will rely on your architect or builder (and consultants they may hire) to understand these laws and design within them. In some cases this will mean adding relatively high-cost building systems, like sprinkler systems or additional exit routes, that are an important financial consideration for homeowners. **The laws that relate to sprinkler requirements, emergency (fire) access to and egress from one- to four-unit buildings in Massachusetts include the following:**

- **The International Residential Code (IRC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to single-unit structures, two-unit structures, townhouses with three stories or less, and accessory structures.
- **The International Building Code (IBC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to all buildings not covered by the IRC, including three- and four-unit structures.
- **The International Existing Building Code (IEBC)** nationally administered regulations that apply to any existing building which is being renovated or added on to.
- **NFPA-1 Fire Code** a nationally administered code that advances fire and life safety for the public and first responders.
- **The Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code (527 CMR)** a state issued version of NFPA-1, which is administered by Inspectional Services and the Authority having Jurisdiction (the AHJ).
- **The Massachusetts State Building Code (780 CMR)** a state administered building code based on IBC, IRC, IEBC, IMC, IECC, ISPC, and IFC, among others.
- **The Massachusetts Architectural Access Board Code (521 CMR)** which are state administered laws related to accessibility in any projects that fall under IBC.

### FOR DETACHED ADUs

Detached buildings with only one or two units (including detached ADUs) will need to adhere to the IRC, the International Residential Code.

### FOR ATTACHED AND INTERNAL ADUs

On the same property as a **one-unit home**:

Attached or internal ADUs added to a one-unit home will need to adhere to IRC, the International Residential Code.

On the same property as a **home with two or more units**:

Attached or internal ADUs added to a building with 2-unit or more principal units will need to adhere to IBC, the International Building Code.

DO I NEED TO INSTALL A SPRINKLER IN MY ADU?

Sprinkler requirements can be triggered by the size of your home, the amount of work required, how many units are in the building, the nature of egress (building exit) design, distance from the street to the ADU, and the amount of frontage the overall buliding or ADU has. When a building changes from having two units to three, the change in occupancy type triggered by the building code change from IRC to IBC will trigger the need for sprinklers in any portion of the building in which 50% or more of the building is being renovated; a requirement specified in IEBC. In many cases, this can mean that only the ADU will need sprinklers. If more than 50% of the building is renovated along with the ADU when changing from IRC to IBC, then the whole building will need sprinklers.

**The requirements are derived from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Fire Safety Code, IRC, and IBC. If all of the below statements are true, your ADU will likely *not* require a sprinkler system.** Check with your architect to learn more.

FOR DETACHED ADUs
You have 20 feet of frontage between your primary building and side lot line.
Your ADU is not behind your building.
Your ADU's entry door is within 25 feet of the fire access road (street).

FOR ATTACHED ADUs
Your building has two units maximum, including the ADU.
If your ADU is behind your building, you have included a throughway (common use hallway), connecting from the front door of the main building to the front door of the unit that is the ADU.
If your ADU is attached and has its own entry door, it also has 20 feet of frontage between the primary building and side lot line.
Your ADU's entry door is within 50 feet from the street, and any portion of the exterior wall is within 150 feet from the street.

FOR INTERNAL ADUs
Your building has two units maximum, including the ADU.
Your ADU's entry door is within 50 feet from the street, and any portion of the exterior wall is within 150 feet from the street.

## WILL MY ADU MEET FIRE ACCESS ROAD REQUIREMENTS?

Below are the requirements for fire access roads. The fire access road can be a public or private street and does not include the sidewalk or other portions of public realm that are not the street. **If all of the below statements are true your ADU will likely meet fire access road requirements.** Check with your architect to learn more.

FOR ALL ADUs		
	Allowable distance from ADU entry door to street	Allowable distance from any portion of the exterior wall to the street
If no sprinklers in the building housing the ADU	25 feet	150 feet
With sprinklers in the building housing the ADU	50 feet	250 feet
If the building housing the ADU is behind another building and does not have adequate frontage of 20 feet	25 feet	no increase with addition of a sprinkler

FOR DETACHED ADUs	
You meet the criteria for EITHER option A OR option B	
Option A	Option B
Your ADU is not behind your building or has 20 feet of frontage	Your ADU is behind your building and does not have 20 feet of frontage, but you do have additional fire protection features including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automatic Sprinkler</li> <li>• Firefighter access path (at least 10 feet wide, free of obstructions including cars and trees)</li> <li>• Wayfinding (lighted entryway and clear path to ADU)</li> </ul>

FOR ATTACHED ADUs	
You meet the criteria for EITHER option A OR option B	
Option A	Option B
Your ADU is not behind your building or has 20 feet of frontage between your primary building and side lot line.	Your ADU is behind your building and does not have adequate frontage but you have added a throughway connecting from the front door of the main building into the ADU.

# HISTORY OF ADU ZONING IN BOSTON

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The City of Boston has been working to enable more construction of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) across Boston's neighborhoods.

Zoning has been one focus of the ADU program. Currently, the City's zoning law allows internal ADUs carved from the existing interior of a home. These are allowed "by-right" (i.e., without public hearings or discretionary approval by a public board or committee). ADUs built as an addition or as a detached structure are allowed only on a case-by-case basis for most neighborhoods, and they require public hearings and approval from the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA). In Mattapan, zoning allows internal, attached, and detached ADUs by-right, provided they meet specific design criteria. The City of Boston is [seeking changes to these zoning regulations](#) to make ADUs by-right across the City, and not just in Mattapan, but these modifications are not yet codified.

As of 2024, approximately 180 ADUs have been permitted in the City through one of these approval mechanisms. The number of ADUs permitted annually has mostly increased over the years, but ADU approvals are not consistent across Boston. Dorchester, East Boston, and Mattapan have been the most popular sites for ADU development thus far.

In addition to zoning and permitting, the City's ADU program has spearheaded education about the process, technical assistance for homeowners, and low-cost ADU



financing for low-, moderate-, and middle-income homeowners.

## **TIMELINE**

### **ADU 1.0 Pilot (November 2017–May 2018)**

The City's first ADU Pilot allowed owner-occupants of 1-, 2-, and 3-unit homes in East Boston, Mattapan, and Jamaica Plain to carve out space within their home to build an ADU. The pilot program received 50 applicants. Of those, 12 applicants received permits, and two applicants completed construction.

### **Citywide zoning amendment (April 2019)**

A zoning amendment based on the ADU 1.0 pilot program was passed to allow ADUs citywide. In this legal framework, owners of 1-, 2-, and 3-unit homes are allowed by-right to build an ADU under certain conditions. Allowed ADUs must be carved from space within their existing building. Any additions, other changes to the building exterior, or new detached buildings are not allowed by-right, and must be considered on a case-by-case basis at the Zoning Board of Appeals. All ADUs, whether allowed by-right or through a special approval process, must still be approved for compliance with the building code and other life safety regulations. This framework remains in place for most Boston neighborhoods as of 2024.

### **ADU 2.0 Pilot (2021–2022)**

The City's second ADU Pilot provided technical assistance to convert existing exterior structures (carriage houses and garages) into ADUs. Sixteen residents were guided through the process of getting building permits and zoning relief.

### **Mattapan ADU Zoning (January 2024)**

New zoning in Mattapan allowed internal, attached, and external ADUs by-right. This reform provided new definitions and framework for citywide ADU reform to build from.



