

# The Adaptation of Alleyways

## Intro:

Cities provide humanity with the framework for some of our richest cultures. Lifestyles tend to blend beautifully into what can simply be described as a melting pot. As Jane Jacobs so eloquently states, “cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” When you bring so many people with so many capabilities together, it is only natural that there will be portions of cities ignored, disregarded, or otherwise relegated to house waste. *This* is the alleyway. When speaking of alleyways, the typical perception conjured consists of trash, shady activity, and danger. These perceptions are not without fair reasoning. For most of their history, alleyways have been unpleasant places for pedestrians to inhabit. This is beginning to change. With the emerging programs being presented in Detroit, Los Angeles, and Seattle, there is a shift towards turning these underutilized assets into worthwhile spaces.

Within the United States the utilization of alleyways beyond just waste collection has taken a great deal of time to develop. In Europe, however, this urban form has been used as an asset for passage for much longer. These types of cobblestone side streets are exactly why people visit Paris, Rome, and Copenhagen. These European street typologies provide excellent precedents for what our alleyways can provide.

My curiosity in alleyways stem from my interest in urban design and adaptive reuse of urban infrastructure. There is a pedestrian quality and scale to alleyways, which offers a fantastic framework for design. They feel distinctly pedestrian, but rarely are they designed with pedestrians in mind. These underutilized spaces lay within some of the most coveted landscapes in our cities, yet we are hardly aware of them. I find this to be absolutely fascinating. The fact that our society can have some of the most coveted parcels of land, with the potential for countless uses, while still being forgotten is remarkable. It is clear to me that these intermediate spaces have the potential for so much more, and I am determined to understand exactly what that potential is.

## Background:

My fascination with the urban streetscape originated from living in a large suburb outside of Chicago, Illinois. Aurora's downtown was urban in its own right, but Chicago really provided me with some of my richest childhood memories. Walking to Wrigley Field with my dad, as we passed with every cultured crevice between every cultured corner; it was enlightening. No more was I engulfed in a sleepy cul-de-sac mono-culture. This was the city. Wherever people could find space to live, they would. And living did not necessarily entail *existing*; it meant people actually participating in the culture that surrounded them.

Though Chicago provided me with my first glimpse of the richness of urbanism, it was actually Aurora that presented me with my first memory of alleyways. In high school, I decided to branch out from my typical friend group, and venture to Downtown Aurora's *Riverfront Playhouse*. That night a small budget student run play about talking domestic cats took the stage. Unsurprisingly, the play was not what caught my attention that night. What did catch my eye that night was where the playhouse was located. Firmly within the downtown which I had spent so many of my schooling years, there was an alleyway tucked within the context. The playhouse nestled within it, I felt as if I had found a hidden treasure.



Until my recent fascination with alleyways I had no idea why this night stuck out to me. Looking back on it, I realize that it is simply because I am transfixed by how much different this space felt from its surrounding contexts. It was a comfortable scale when everywhere else in town felt vehicular.

## Current Work:

I applied to the Las Vegas urban design studio this spring with the intent to find a niche in urban design. Urban design in whole intrigues me, but there was never one piece that resonated above all else. That was true until this project.

After having visited one of the sites in Downtown Las Vegas, the site of the old Victory Hotel, I became enamored with one of the elements of the site: the alleyway. The exterior context of the site provided little refuge as the block was surrounded by two parking areas, a county jail, and the backside of City Hall. With a central alleyway running 25' wide, I thought it made sense to make a prominent circulation move on the interior of the site. That singular design move has escalated into an exciting development. By turning the focus of the buildings inward, the site is able to utilize this fantastic pedestrian thoroughfare.



The alleyway above touches so many dynamics of Downtown Las Vegas' urban context: pedestrian access, retail uses, shade, existing infrastructure, and a great deal more. Though we are only mid-way through the design process, this project has given me a fervor for design that I had not reached previously. There is little doubt in my mind that I would like to explore this niche of urban design further.

## Proposal:

When speaking on a subject matter that you feel passionately for, it is important to gather as much information on that subject as remotely possible. This especially holds true with design. In fact, when investigating a subject matter that is based in pedestrian experience, such as alleyway design, it is of the utmost importance to experience it in person. Articles and photographs can only do so much when the experience of the place can only exist in reality.

So my proposal consists of a three week exploration of Scandinavia; one week in Denmark, one in Sweden, and one week in Norway. I have always admired the simplicity of Scandinavian culture and design, and after having done some research, it would appear that there are great precedents for alleyways, both past and present. The following page represents my proposed itinerary.

## Week One:

**Cities of Study:** Copenhagen, Denmark & Aarhus, Denmark

**Precedents:** Jorcks Passage (pictured below), Side Alleys adjacent to Ny Ostergade, Strandgade Alley (Dragor, Denmark), Aarhus Alleyways.



**Potential contacts:** I hope to be able to get in contact with someone at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, specifically within their Architecture school. Other options include contacting the Aarhus School of Architecture. Both could present opportunities to speak with a person of familiarity and expertise on these alleyways.

**Importance & Takeaways:** Between the urban and retail based Jorcks Passage and the Ny Ostergade alleys, there is plenty of exploration potential for the urban context. The Strandgade Alley and Aarhus alleys balance the urban precedents with much less dense areas for study. It is important to get a balanced outlook on the alleyways of any study area.



## Week Two:

**City of Study:** Stockholm, Sweden

**Precedents:** Gamla Stan Nygaten Old Town alleys (pictured below), Marten Trotzig alley (narrowest alley in Stockholm but still effective!)



**Potential contacts:** KTH Royal Institute of Technology is based in Stockholm. They have an architecture program that has focuses on urban design and the built environment. Similarly to Copenhagen, I hope to speak to local experts about these places more specifically.

**Importance & Takeaways:** The Gamla Stan peninsula is the only major alleyway precedent within Stockholm. Though it is just a single neighborhood, there is a bevy of alleyways to study. Many made for passage, and many made for lingering. I hope to be able to understand how Stockholm has retrofitted these “Old Town” alleys into usable infrastructure for a modern pedestrian.

### Week Three:

**City of Study:** Oslo, Norway & Bergen, Norway

**Precedents:** Wooden Alleys of Bergen (pictured below), Torgatta Pedestrian Alleyway, Many other Pedestrian side-streets in Oslo.



**Potential contacts:** The Nordic Urban Design Association is located in Bergen, Norway, where the wooden alleyways are also located. Between NUDA and the Oslo School of Architecture-Landscape Architecture, I believe there is a multitude of people I can contact.

**Importance & Takeaways:** Oslo has an incredibly pedestrian oriented downtown. This lends itself to many pedestrian malls. These major pedestrian mall streets branch off into narrower pedestrian streets, ones that are more in tune with alleyways. Pairing this urban setting with the rustic and retrofitted alleyways of Bergen, there appears to be an abundance of opportunity for study in Norway.

## Budget:

**Airfare:** Flight from Chicago O'Hare to Kastrup Copenhagen is approximately \$1000.

**Eurail/RyanAir/Other Travel Expenses:** Eurail pass costs approximately \$300, RyanAir flights cost approximately \$50 a piece and approximately \$100 in total, and other types of transportation (such as taxis) will cost about \$250. These three figures result in \$650.

**Hostel/Hotel/AirBnB:** The cost per night will be roughly \$50 in Copenhagen, Oslo, Bergen, Stockholm, etc. At \$50 for 20 nights would come out to be approximately \$1000.

**Food:** Most establishments in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark appear to have options for \$10-15 meals. This means that on an average day, food will cost approximately \$50, and for 21 days that comes out to be \$1050.

The total of this comes out to be \$3700. I have been advised to add on about 10% for random costs along the way, so my total budget is \$4000. I would appreciate any additional insights into this figure.

Airfare	\$1000
Additional Travel Costs	\$650
Hotel Expenses	\$1000
Food	\$1050
Additional 10%(ish)	\$300
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$4000</b>



## Additional Ideas:

This trip will hopefully allow me to expand my understanding of alleyway design, as well as get me in contact with others interested in alleyway design. One resource that I have been using to fuel my interest in alleyways is Daniel Toole's blog, *Alleys of Seattle*. This blog follows the journey of Daniel, who is an urban designer in Seattle, as he seeks alleyway precedents in Asia and Australia that can be used for the Pacific Northwest. His blog (found at <http://alleysofseattle.com/>) is regularly updated. If funded, I would like to get in contact with Mr. Toole about my own personal travel, inspired by his blog. Whether my project is funded or not, I still intend on purchasing and reading Mr. Toole's book "Tight Urbanism."

I also plan on continuing to update my own design blog throughout the trip, found at <https://tcmartin.squarespace.com/blog>.

## Anticipated Results:

Outside of my interaction with Mr. Toole, I am hopeful to be able to present my findings in the Fall of 2015 back at Iowa State. This is largely dependent on any job I might have by then, but I believe with enough foresight that this will be possible. I would like to present to faculty, and perhaps students, about how the designs I studied, and the process that I took to study them. Rooting this back to the urban landscapes that we are familiar with will be vital in this presentation. It is important to present the concept that any piece of land, no matter how poorly maintained or neglected, can be utilized with great results.

I am passionate about this topic, and would cherish the opportunity to study alleyways in Scandinavia. I believe in a pedestrian based city, and I believe in an alleyways contribution to a pedestrian based city. It is as much about adapting our cultural mindset as it is adapting the design of our alleyways; I cannot think of a better way of understanding these adaptations than by immersing myself in a culture that is well established in these philosophies.