

ALLEYS – History & Challenges

Cities bring many people together in close proximity. People are usually focused on getting groceries, getting to school, commuting to work and attending family or community functions. Sometimes people don't even notice when new services and technologies change the way they interface with their environment. Technologies and services have changed dramatically over the years and will continue to change.

Derived from necessity and planned for simplicity, alleys were included in older urban developments. In the past, alleys were a common way to interface with the urban environment. In the Midwest, alleys are commonly found in cities as early as the 1830's. In the eastern U.S., alleys were often part of urban areas from the very beginning.

What are alleys?

'Alleys' are usually defined as narrow passageways behind or between buildings. 'Side lanes' are typically built alongside primary buildings. Side lanes access service structures located behind the primary building. Some urban alleys and side lanes developed spontaneously because of how people used their property. Most, however, were planned from the onset. The original town plat of Hutchinson included alleys. Using a standard grid system, alleys in Hutchinson were usually continuous and predictable in dimension.

Why do we have them? What do they do for us?

Alleys served as a place to hide the lesser, more mundane needs of life. In the eastern U.S., some older cities developed without alleys. It wasn't unusual to see streets clogged with service vehicles and piles of trash and manure stacked up in front yards. Alleys became dependable places for trash collection, utilities and service access. By the 1820's, alleys became even more important, particularly in the Midwest, due to the popularity of horses as a means of transportation for a majority of people. Alleys were the place to build a barn, bring in hay and feed and to take out manure and trash. Alleys were viewed as the city's 'capillaries' connecting to the 'arteries', its streets

Alleys also served an important public health role. By placing trash in alleys, pedestrians weren't confronted with as much trash during their daily activities. For example, in New York City, which didn't have a system of alleys, rodent borne diseases were a significant problem. Chicago, on the other hand, managed to limit the spread of rodent borne diseases because they removed trash through a network of alleys.

Even as early as the late 1860's, regularly scheduled curbside trash removal services became available in larger cities. Because of this new service, developers began to eliminate alleys. Houses were moved further back on lots toward the center of the block, giving property owners a large front yard to enjoy. Curbside trash removal services allowed communities to deviate from the typical grid system of blocks with alleys. Without alleys, the standard grid-based street network wasn't needed anymore. Streets developed in harmony with surrounding landscapes using curvilinear street systems.

By the beginning of the 20th century, it was more and more rare to see alleys developed. This trend increased significantly as cars became the primary means of transportation. Substantial driveways to garages began to take the place of alleys and side lanes. Cities in the western U.S. generally developed later, so they typically have fewer alleys. Large driveways and some side lanes were used instead, as the automobile became more prolific. Thousands of alleys were even removed in favor of infrastructure better suited to cars and trucks.

How can they work better for us?

Over the last several years, an appreciation of alleys has re-emerged. '*Green alleys*' are becoming more popular as a means to manage utilities, trash, stormwater and pedestrian traffic. Green alleys are particularly popular in densely-populated developments adjacent to busy roadways.

Existing alleys present significant challenges to designing effective improvements. Almost all alleys were designed for horses and carts, as opposed to cars and trucks (especially heavy trucks). Because the surfacing in most alleys wasn't improved until barns were converted to garages, many alleys don't have effective stormwater conveyance. Drainage was usually not a significant consideration until automobiles began to routinely use alleys. Since most property owners weren't interested in paying for improvements both in front of their house and behind their house, typical alley improvements consisted simply of gravel surfacing.

Unpaved alleys are particularly vulnerable to damage during the spring thaw cycle. Heavy cars and trucks tend to pump wet gravel to the edge of the alley, leaving behind potholes and ponding. After thawing completely, the alleys can be regraded. However, some gravel always accumulates at the edge of abutting properties, creating more drainage problems over time. Some cities try to address this issue by requiring street-side garbage pickup. Others restrict garbage collection in alleys during the late winter/early spring season. Limiting alley traffic to resident vehicles can help to avoid damage caused by larger, heavy vehicles.

Typical alley improvements usually require installation of storm sewers to improve drainage, along with grading, curb & gutter and surfacing with either bituminous or concrete pavement. The grading and paving must be of sufficient strength for large, heavy service vehicles that will use the alleys. Where drainage tolerances are tight, a common improvement consists of concrete pavement with drainage down the middle or to one side of the alley.

The City of Hutchinson typically assesses 50% of the cost of alley improvements to abutting property owners, recognizing that alley improvements decrease City maintenance costs over the life of the improvement.