

# Amy Magyar's Guest House: Friend Next Door & Nest for Me

*Editor's Note: This post is an extended case study from the AARP VT Is There an ADU in Your Retirement Plan 2-Pager published in 2022. The other posts are [Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU: Inspiration for the Neighborhood](#) and [Brooks & Brian's ADU: A Retirement Plan for Mom & For Us](#). Also, check out [10 Ways Your ADU Can Support Your Retirement](#).*

Lina Menard



*Amy Magyar in front of her ADU, a 420 square foot converted carriage house*

## Quick Facts

- Owner's Name: Amy Magyar
- Tenant's Name: Christy Moore (friend of owner)
- City & State: Burlington, VT
- Designer Name: Amy Magyar
- Builder Name: Rob Shea & Amy Magyar
- Year Built: 2018
- ADU Type: carriage house
- SF: 420
- Approx Cost: \$50,000

Amy Magyar has been a big fan of small houses for many years, but she wasn't familiar with the term "accessory dwelling unit" until she approached the planning department at the City of Burlington. It was 2017 and Amy explained to them she wanted to transform the storage space in her dilapidated carriage house into an office space. Amy explains: "ADU is not a term I knew of until I went to pull the permit. I told them 'I want to make my structure habitable.' They said 'oh, it's an ADU!' "

Amy had been fascinated by living small because of her love for home improvement shows and because her work required a lot of travel. Travel enabled her to stay in clever, small spaces.

*"For years I've been watching what they're doing with tiny houses, but a tiny house was a little too tiny. I knew I could get by with less though. With all the traveling I did for my work in the snow and winter industry, I've stayed in small spaces - mostly hotel rooms - all over the country. So I started asking myself 'how much do I really need?'"*

- Amy Magyar

At the time, Amy's 1200 square foot house was a comfortable size for her and her then-partner in both work and business. They had an office three blocks away from the house, which gave them both a professional setting for meeting with clients and some separation between home and work. When the two of them parted ways, Amy kept her house and her partner kept the office. So Amy started exploring possibilities of a home office. There was plenty of room in the house. In fact, there was perhaps *too much* room.

*"When I was single and alone the house felt quite big, but I didn't want to leave my property. I found myself eyeing the dilapidated 420 square foot carriage house. I knew it could be beautiful, so I decided to make it an office. I figured, 'why not put in a bathroom?' And then I thought 'maybe I could put in a kitchenette...'. Really what I was saying is 'why don't I make it a nest for myself?' I started thinking that if I liked being there I could rent out the big house, either long-term or short-term. I told myself, 'I can just see what it's like, keep my options open.' So it started out with the necessity of needing a place to work - and suddenly I'm part of the small house nation."*

- Amy Magyar

Amy was on a shoestring budget, so she took out a \$30,000 Home Equity Line of Credit (HELOC). She notes that her bank "gave me a good rate, knowing it would enhance the property's value. But with only \$30,000 to work with, I knew I'd really have to be smart about the design."

Amy designed her ADU herself and her primary design criteria was to make the ADU feel bigger than it was. She didn't want it to feel dark or tight, so she vaulted the space by

removing the ceiling over one half of the carriage house. Her house was built in the late 1800s and the carriage house likely in the early 1900s, so it was also important to her that she honor the historic character of the structures. Amy says: “Aesthetically, it’s nodding to the history of an 1883 house, while also modernizing. The ADU has a smidge of a modern farmhouse style. There are touches of old and touches of new.”



*Amy Magyar designed her ADU herself, incorporating modern elements while remaining true in some aspects to its early 1900s vintage*

Daylighting was nearly as important to Amy, and it was a key part of her strategy to make her small space feel larger. Amy is originally from upstate New York and has lived in Vermont for several years, so she is well acquainted with the impact of the long, cold winters on morale and mood.

*“I have lived all across the country and living in Vermont has taught me light is so important here, especially in the dark months. So I spent a lot of time looking at what they do in Scandinavia. How do they use light? How do they use color? I decided to use as much natural light as I possibly could, because that’s going to make things feel bigger and warmer, especially in the cold, dark months.”*

- Amy Magyar

Environmental sustainability was also a big consideration for Amy as a designer-builder-owner. She utilized low-flow fixtures for the shower and the kitchen sink. She would have also selected a low-flow toilet, but the plumber she worked with cautioned against it because of the length of the sewer pipe necessary to get from her ADU to the street.

Amy is a “huge believer” in salvage as well, so six of the major design features of her ADU - including windows, sinks, and wood beams - are salvaged pieces.

*“Can I go find something that already exists to buy? I feel strongly about that, knowing there are so many amazing finds out there. When you have no money you skrimp. Salvage can be great on the pocket book, but for me it was even better because some of the things were from down the street. There was an old duplex being torn down and the landlord had just put in new windows, so he said the windows were mine. They would have been \$2,000 for these four double-paned, insulated windows and I got them for free!”*

- Amy Magyar

Amy used spray foam insulation for the ceiling and exterior walls and rock wool insulation to soundproof the interior walls and the ceiling of the bathroom. The ADU's design utilizes an open concept, so the only door is the bathroom and closet door. Amy notes that in a small space bathroom privacy isn't always a given, but she prioritized this "creature comfort" as she put it, even on her tight budget.

Amy wasn't used to air conditioning anyhow so she chose not to design it into her ADU. She explains "cooling is very much about fans in the right place and windows and blinds open at the right time." For her heat system, she was considering a ductless mini-split heat pump when her plumber suggested that since the cement slab would need to be ripped up and repoured she instead consider a hydronic radiant floor heat system. She explains: "I think you forget what my budget is because that's for rich people,' I told him and he said 'No, silly, I can run plastic tubing because we have to redo the slab anyway!'

She was easily convinced and she now has an on-demand propane water heater that heats the floor and provides hot water to her sinks and shower. "The cat thinks I built this house for her!" Amy laughs, explaining that her cat loves lounging on the warm floors.

*"She's pretty happy and I'm happy, too. Everything warms up. The tables get a little warmer, the sofa gets a little warmer, and that helps hold the heat, so I don't have to run it for very long. I have a Nest, so I can watch what happens from anywhere. It's so great to be able to put that on timers. I just give it a little bump in the morning and things are beautiful the rest of the day. Of course, sometimes when it's 20 below, I need to bump it up a little more." - Amy Magyar*

For Amy, the biggest challenge of the whole ADU creation process was “the fact that the City of Burlington does not understand small builds.” Like so many other ADU owners, Amy discovered that just because her ADU was small, it wasn’t necessarily simple. Amy put it this way: “Even though you’re working with a 420 square foot space, you mentally have to get in the mindset that you’re building a house. It doesn’t matter that it’s smaller. It could be 4,200 square feet. You still want to have switches in the right places. This isn’t just a little rehab. You are building a home for yourself, so there is a lot to consider.”



*Amy Magyar's ADU has a birdseye view of the Great Room from the loft*

However, from Amy’s perspective, the City of Burlington is “not up to speed and comfortable with code for smaller spaces.” She explains, “they don’t want you falling over the edge of a loft, so you have to add railings. I get that, but I’m 5’-4”, so I can only stand up in the loft at the

highest point. The railings I had to put up are at eye-level. I'll be on my hands and knees, so how am I going to fall over? The challenge is they don't seem open to scaling."

Amy continues: "The code says for something my size says I don't need a smoke and carbon monoxide detector, but of course we put one in. Well, the inspector came and saw the one and asked about it. The electrician said: 'It's CO and smoke and we know it's not needed by code, but of course we put one in.' So then the inspector said 'I'm going to make her put in two.' At that point we'd closed up some of the walls, so now needed to open them up, which was not okay."

However, the biggest frustration was that because of the distance of her ADU from the street, Amy was required to put in a sprinkler system. The rationale behind this requirement is that it would be difficult for a fire truck to get to the ADU because it's located behind the primary dwelling. The fact that Amy has "a bowling alley of a driveway" didn't make a difference.

*"The State of Vermont has a different code for sprinklers than the City of Burlington. The State doesn't say I need it, but the City says 'but we say 'you do.'" We were halfway through the build and we had to go through and dig the pipe out. Safety is important. I dated a frieman. I get safety. Still, it was a tough pill to swallow. I either needed to put a 300 gallon tank of water in my basement or put a \$1,000 pipe in the ground. I didn't like the idea of all that water sitting there, so I went for the dedicated pipe. When it went in I thought 'I'm hopefully never going to see you again and I'm sad you cost \$1,000.'"*

- Amy Magyar



The sprinkler requirement was related to her ADU being detached from her primary dwelling as well. Amy realized at this point that if her carriage house was connected to her house by a breezeway it would have been considered an addition and it would not have been required to have a sprinkler system. With plumbing and electrical components, the sprinkler system cost her \$10,000, which was a fifth the total cost of the project. Amy says she believes it's important that the city inform people who are building detached ADUs that they will be required to invest in a sprinkler system. She also quips: "If there is an apocalypse come here, my dear, because I have TWO smoke and carbon monoxide alarms AND a sprinkler system, so we'll be safe here!"

Amy estimates she did about 40% of the construction herself. She hired Rob Shea and his crew for the other 60%, including projects that required more hands or special equipment. For instance, it was Rob's crew that took down half of the carriage house's loft during the demolition phase, providing the engineering to stabilize it. Amy had pulled only \$30,000 from her HELOC so between the sprinkler system adding an additional \$10,000 and a few other surprises and upgrades, she landed at approximately \$50,000. (If you've been reading other ADU Case Studies, you'll recognize this is still a remarkably scrappy budget for an ADU. Much of that is attributable to Amy doing a large portion of the design and build work herself.)

As she was designing her new space, Amy kept in mind the items she already owned and what was most precious to her.

*“When I was downsizing into 420 square feet I realized there was a good chance I would never host Thanksgiving dinner. People would ask me ‘Where will you host Thanksgiving?’ and I’d tell them. ‘Not in my house!’ I can have people over, of course, but not 20. So the first question is ‘What do I own? What do I really use?’ The first thing was making sure I really pared down what was going to come into the house.”*

- Amy Magyar

By identifying what she actually uses, Amy was able to design storage where she needs it most. Sometimes this required breaking with typical expectations of which activities happen in which rooms. Amy explains that since she can only stand up in the sleeping loft in the very center, she doesn’t store her clothing in her sleeping space, even though most places she’s lived her clothes would be in her bedroom. Instead she has clothes storage downstairs and that’s where she gets dressed.

Amy has several clever hidden storage solutions as well. (Check out [ADU Storage Solutions](#) for more ideas!)

- Amy used a single barn door for the front of her closet, which is right next to the bathroom. When someone goes into the bathroom they slide the barn door over, which closes the bathroom door and opens up the closet. Amy notes that some people are worried about their closets being exposed, but she jokes “I worked retail for 25 years, so my closets are a work of art!” She notes that in hindsight a pocket door may have been a better choice, but she appreciates that this barn door is a space saver for two uses.
- Amy maximized the space under the sink by adding a shelf. Rather than letting the sink base be a cavernous space that collects cleaning supplies and plastic bags, Amy uses this space for kitchen items.

- Amy has a chair with a long slipcover. Since no one can see underneath the chair, that's where her printer and office supplies are stored. She explains: "People see a beautiful chair and don't know that it's my office!"
- She also has a daybed that serves as her couch most of the time and becomes a bed when sister sleeps over. Underneath she stores "wheely baskets" and her microwave. She notes: "I don't use a microwave much so I don't need it to be prominent. When I do need it I'm happy to get down on hands and knees."

The grand finale of Amy's storage surprises is right under her guests' noses when they sit down for a cuppa. Amy explains: "I've got a coffee table, which is really a chest for linens. I cut a hole in it so the cat can come in and out. It's her litter box, right in the middle of the living room!"

Now that she's settled in, Amy says the highlight of the whole process of creating her ADU was "the number of people in the neighborhood and in the trades who were excited for me. There were so many people wanting to see this succeed. When I look around, I see reminders of all these people who were excited and wanted to help in some way. My house is warm because of the people who warmed it with their sweat equity and materials. The people who pitched in, those are the memories."

As she was building her ADU, Amy planned to live in her house and use the ADU as her office, but "when COVID hit, everything stopped." Jobs went virtual. Amy flipped work from home on its head and started living in her new office. She says: "The first couple months I shut down the big house and lived in the little house. I saved myself so much electricity and so much heating." Then Amy's friend Christy called from Baltimore, saying she needed a change of scenery and some companionship. Christy asked "hey, can I come up? Do you have space?" and Amy replied "I have a whole house for you!"

Amy realized the income from renting her house to her friend, a self-declared “Covid refugee,” would allow her to have “the flexibility in a down year to feed myself, clothe myself, and pay my bills.” She continues: “I didn’t think I’d be living full time in this space, but I wanted flexibility. This became my nest, the place that is for me.”

Amy and Christy each have space of their own, but they also have a friend right next door. They’ve found it’s brought them closer both physically and in their friendship.

*“One of the things that has been such a pleasant ‘ah ha’ moment is that one of the beauties of ADUs is that I live alone, but not really. It’s nice to know that even though we have separate entrances, I have a friend within 50 feet. It’s great as a single female to be able to scratch on the back door and say ‘hey, I’m out of sugar’ or to be able to text in the middle of the night ‘what was that sound?’ It has been a benefit I just didn’t even realize. The two of us are not related, but there’s this beauty of we-have-each-other’s-backs. It’s nice for me, even now as the 49 year old single lady, but I can see it would be especially nice as I’m aging, knowing that someone is nearby.”*

- Amy Magyar

Amy explains that her ADU has become part of her retirement plan:

*“I’m 49 and not quite at that point, but some things have changed in my life and the world is changing, so I’m thinking ahead. I could rent my house out, either long or short term for income. If I stay in this house for another 20 years, having the ADU will help me stay in Burlington, which is getting more expensive by the day. And when it’s time for me to move, the fact that I’ve invested in the property means when I go to sell it, I know I will*

*make my money on it and then some. I don't just have a house and dilapidated carriage house where you store your crap. The ADU is a flexible space. A caretaker or nanny could live here or someone could use it as a really big home office. I wouldn't be able to afford this house if I wanted to buy it today, but I have people knocking on the door, asking if I'll sell it. The house for me is my stocks and bonds, my retirement plan. I invested in what I already owned."*

- Amy Magyar

So what advice does Amy have for homeowners considering creating an ADU on their own property?

*"Go to your city. Do they have a PDF 1-pager about ADUs? Something you can download in the middle of the night when you're exploring possibilities? If not, talk to someone in the planning and zoning department. Ask 'What do I need to know about doing this?' Ask 'What are some of the pitfalls?' Go to your city and say 'here's what I'm thinking.' Our city says 'Draw it out and then we'll tell you if you can do it.' There needs to be something where it says 'here's some rough guidelines, here's some of the things you'll need to worry about, and some basic logistics.' But the most important thing is to reach out to people who have already done it. Go find someone in your neighborhood who built an ADU. Because the city wants this to happen, but they didn't have a resource for me to go to, so I went to someone else who had done it. I stalked my neighbor who was  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through building an ADU and I took advantage of his advice."*

- Amy Magyar

One final note, Amy's ADU was featured in an article called "[Two Burlington Residents Talk Accessory Dwelling Units, Pros and Cons](#)" in the local newspaper Seven Days in June of 2021 in case you'd like to read even more about Amy's ADU.