

# Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's Backyard Cottage: Inspiration for the Neighborhood

*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 [Amy Magyar's ADU: Friend Next Door & Nest for Me](#) and [Brooks & Brian's ADU: Retirement Plan for Mom & Us](#). Also, check out [10 Ways Your ADU Can Support Your Retirement](#).*

Lina Menard



*Ruby & Andy's Backyard ADU*

## Quick Facts

- Owner's Name: Zpora Perry (daughter) & Leighton Johnson (son-in-law)
- Tenant Name: Andy Simon & Ruby Perry (parents)
- Location: Burlington, VT
- Designer Name: Ruby Perry
- Consulted Architects: [Missa Aloisi](#) & Anna Telemark
- Drafter: [Robert Riversong](#)
- ADU Type: Stand-Alone Detached Unit (New Construction)
- Year Built: 2014
- Square Footage: 400
- Total Cost: \$75,000

Andy Simon and Ruby Perry became aware of ADUs so long ago neither of them can remember precisely when it was. Andy's brother lives in Berkeley, CA, where the population density and high cost of living have encouraged the development of ADUs for decades. When they visited, Andy and Ruby enjoyed spotting these creative, small housing options, which took the form of backyard cottages, carriage houses, and apartments carved out of older homes. ADUs were "an attractive option," as Andy puts it.

Meanwhile, Ruby and Andy decided to try on living small in an entirely different way. They designed and built out a school bus - or "skoolie." They lived in the bus, in North Carolina, Vermont, and California, for three years before moving to an apartment in Burlington, VT.

*"We had a fair amount of experience living in a school bus that we designed, so we knew we could live in a really small space and wanted to live in a small space. We have strong values to minimize our footprint, to make the best use of resources, and to live in a place connected to the earth, with gardens around us. We've considered every possibility in searching for this."*

-Ruby Perry



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Dining*

About 10 years ago they began discussing in earnest the possibility of finding a place to share with their daughter Zpora and her husband Leighton. The benefits were obvious: proximity to family, reduced living expenses, and each generation having a space of their own. The timing seemed right, too, since they were all in transition. Ruby and Andy were ready to put down roots and Zpora and her husband were planning to start a family. They began looking for a house and focused on finding a duplex. Unfortunately, they weren't alone in this endeavor; duplexes were not plentiful in Burlington and they usually went quickly.

*“Once our daughter and son-in-law bought this house with a big enough yard, we looked at the ordinance in Burlington, and, to our surprise, we didn't see any real obstacle to building an ADU. It turned out there were some, which were more about their interpretation than the ordinance itself. They've clarified and modified it since.”*

- Andy Simon



As they began designing a detached ADU for the backyard, Ruby took a design class at [Yestermorrow Design-Build School](#) that architect Missa Aloisi of [Hinge Architecture](#) co-taught. Ruby engaged Missa to review their design ideas and assist with and supported the planning and zoning permitting process.

*“We didn’t want to spend any more time designing than we needed to because we wanted to get building! Missa had some great ideas and helped us work through the possibilities. Once you have a second story loft you need to figure out a way to get up there and a ladder and stairs take up space. We explored a barn door between the bed alcove and rest of the house. Some options proved to be too expensive or complicated or take up too much space.”*

- Andy Simon



Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Kitchen & Living Room

As they began designing their detached ADU, they followed design guidelines, including matching the street frontage. They might have made the ADU taller, but they were limited to 15 feet. As Ruby explains: “the design standard said it had to be in keeping with neighborhood character and I appreciate that.”

While the city had requirements for the size, scale, and character of the building, Ruby and Andy identified a few must-haves of their own. For Ruby, natural daylighting was a high priority. She notes that the best place on the property from a passive solar heating perspective was the back south-facing corner of the lot, which was not their first choice for privacy. The trade-off seemed worthwhile. Ruby says, “the sun heats our house on sunny days and on less-than-sunny days we have solar panels.”

Andy notes it was important to save energy for environmental reasons, but also so that their home would be “cheap to heat and cool.” This commitment to energy efficiency pushed them towards a highly-insulated double-wall system that’s a foot thick, making the 400 interior square footage of the ADU considerably smaller than the 500 square foot exterior footprint would belie. Ruby adds, “We insulated the walls and ceiling with blown-in cellulose. We get a kick out of the fact that we’re keeping cozy thanks to old romance novels.”

Andy and Ruby spent the winter before their build going through the permitting process with the city and collecting materials, including lights and tiles. They found an efficient refrigerator and a small electric stove. Missa had strongly recommended they use new rather than salvaged windows. Andy explains: “We went back and forth on the idea of salvaged windows. We found some beautiful windows I wanted to use that were even double-paned. Ultimately, we decided, in the interest of efficiency, to go with new windows.”



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Greenhouse & Garden*

HVAC regulations required central heating even though they intended to use a wood stove, so they installed a heat pump, which they rarely use in the winter. As Andy says, “we usually heat with the smallest amount of wood you can imagine!”

Aging-in-place was also a key design consideration for Ruby and Andy as they planned their ADU. They developed a design for a one-story ADU and they incorporated doors with adequate clearance for a wheelchair. Ruby says, “the fact that the house is totally accessible, a one-floor walk-out is part of the plan for aging-in-place.” Andy adds, “we would have liked to put in a loft, but it didn’t stand up to scrutiny. We acknowledge that climbing a ladder will only get harder.”





*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Bedroom*

Thanks to the family-oriented nature of their housing configuration, they have access to storage in their daughter's basement and garage, in addition to the storage in their ADU.

*"I think of that as bulk storage. I don't think we could live as well as we do in this space without an external bulk storage. We had developed a lifestyle of living simply, not having tons of clothes or books. We have enough storage with drawers under the bed, hooks on the walls, and high shelves in the kitchen, but if you build it, you will fill it up. We didn't want it to have a huge number of spaces to accumulate stuff. We didn't want a lot of things built-in because we wanted to be able to move things around, to change them as we change. It's nice to rearrange the furniture even in a small space."*

- Ruby Perry

Andy and Ruby had built a house in Westford, VT in 1989, so they had some building experience, but it was still a steep learning curve for them to general contract the construction of their ADU. As Andy put it, “on some level the biggest challenge was having the know-how to construct the house.” Ruby and Andy were able to finesse their limited experience by hiring a carpenter who was willing to work with them. They were general contracting, and he was part time, primarily providing technical assistance and tools. He would be there from 7 a.m.-2 p.m. daily, and they would work out design considerations together. “Ruby was the designer, and he was game to help us. We went on the internet and looked stuff up when we needed to,” Andy shares.



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Kitchen*

Andy explains another frustration was that “despite the seemingly clear path the ordinance gave us, there were challenges. The Development Review Board had some daily picky considerations they needed us to deal with. They wanted us to have very clear specs, including details of the siding, exactly what that looked like. We had to measure the setback of all houses on the street.”



A big consideration they ran into was that planning and zoning wanted them to have a driveway and a garage.

*“We had no plans to have a car, so we didn’t want to do a curb-cut, a driveway, and a garage. We wanted gardens all around us. We even considered renting a parking space for a car that we didn’t own! We presented a case to them that we had all the transportation options: car share, bus, biking, and walking. Ultimately, what we needed to do was put a statement in the deed that there would be no more than two personal vehicles on the homestead ever. We had to pay a lawyer to write it up and include that.”*

- Ruby Perry



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Bathroom*

The Design Review Board gave approval to their strategy. Andy and Ruby's approach, stating their case to combine parking requirements for the ADU and the primary dwelling, set a precedent in the City to minimize parking spaces associated with ADUs. The City no longer requires parking for long-term rental ADU development.

In February, once they had a basic drawing for the house, Ruby and Andy decided to invite *all* the adjacent neighbors to come over for tea and cookies to see the design. They asked their neighbors for their feelings, their experience in the neighborhood, and talked things through with anyone who expressed reluctance.

"That was a good step for us," Andy explains. "The other thing we learned talking to neighbors was that we had thought about doing a basement, but every single person in our immediate vicinity said they had flooding, so we decided not to do that. A lot of water comes down the hill, but our daughter didn't have flooding in her basement, so we wouldn't have known, but the neighbors knew."

Ruby agrees that engaging the neighbors was a key to their project's success and to their family settling into the Five Sisters neighborhood. She says "that was an important step for us, reaching out to our community. We went out of our way to listen. And we actually did a shadow study, which shows how much shadowing there would be to the north of us, how much the ADU would shadow neighbors to the north. It turns out the ADU would have little impact on the amount of sunlight they got. That's something I think the city should actually require us to do. Some other neighbors built a second story, which totally overshadows their neighbor to the north."

A final bump in the road was that a neighbor came to the Design Review Board and objected to their plan. Ruby and Andy wanted to locate the structure as far north on the property as they could and a neighbor had concerns with regards to daylight and their kitchen window. The architect created a sun study video that showed the placement had no adverse effect on their daylight. Andy says, "Her main objection was that she doesn't like change. Her kids used to play in this yard. So we had to wait an extra 30 days while that challenge worked itself through. It was easy though."

When asked what happened with the neighbor who had filed a complaint, Ruby and Andy both chuckled. "We have become friends with them," Ruby says "and she was over recently and I asked her if she missed the yard and she said 'absolutely not!'"



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's ADU Dining & Kitchen*

At the time of their build, only one other detached ADU had been approved in Burlington, and Ruby and Andy had some previous experience with building, but they were owner-builders, rather than professionals. Andy believes the city would have been more comfortable working with professionals and notes “they said they’d accept our drawings, but it became clear they had a bias, so we paid to have someone generate drawings. We had an Alaska slab which they weren’t familiar with. Robert [Riversong] drafted it and he’s imminently qualified, but the city required us to hire an engineer to review and okay the plans, so that also went into the cost of the house.”

Andy and Ruby’s ADU was completely paid off in three years. It was funded initially with retirement funds. When it became clear they wouldn’t be able to build the ADU for the amount they had originally hoped, they got a loan from a local credit union and two personal loans from friends. Nevertheless, their ADU is one of the least expensive in the collection of ADU case studies on [AccessoryDwellings.org](http://AccessoryDwellings.org), primarily because of the sweat equity poured into it and the careful boneyarding of materials in advance.



“The process of building was very exciting,” Ruby explains. “Don [the carpenter with whom they worked] is very proud of this project. He said he learned as much as he had in his 30 years of building. It’s a place that’s a pleasure to live in. It’s a joy. It’s a place that fits. I think that’s pretty important to feel a sense of belonging in it.”

Ruby is delighted that their home has caught attention, sparked curiosity, and inspired other people to consider an ADU. [An article about their ADU](#) was published in the local paper, Seven Days, the year after their dwelling was completed, sparking even more curiosity. Ruby says “where we are is a major pedestrian path to the park. Every neighbor has stopped to say ‘hi’ and ask questions. We’re the ADU advocates and the garden advocates in our neighborhood. I appreciate that we can be an inspiration just by living our lives.”

The ADU is serving as Ruby and Andy’s primary dwelling, just as they’d intended. It’s also a key part of their retirement plan.

*“Our daughter and son-in-law own this property, but we paid to build the ADU. We invested our retirement funds to build this, so we’d have an affordable place to live. We made it our priority from the beginning to be a support for them. We have no investment in owning it ourselves and generating wealth from it. It’s not been difficult to make it our priority to be available for what they need: growing food, childcare, and creating a beautiful environment with the gardens.”*

- Ruby Perry



*Ruby Perry & Andy Simon's granddaughter picking cherry tomatoes in their ADU Greenhouse*

The closeness to their daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter is not just proximal. They've also intertwined their lives. Ruby and Andy pay "a really minimal payment" to their daughter and son-in-law in rent and they share utilities. They're on a phone plan together. They have an exchange of money every month, keeping track of what each household has spent.

*"That makes it absolutely an affordable place to live. If we were paying rent anywhere else it would be hard to make ends meet living on social security. We're pretty intimately tied with them. The summer we were building was the summer our granddaughter was born, so after our daughter went back to work after her maternity leave, even during the build, we were responsible for a baby three days a week. They depend on us and we depend on them. It's a mutual dependency. We are very aware of respecting the boundaries. We don't go charging over there nor do they come here - except for our granddaughter! We're connected to them emotionally and logistically, and to some extent financially. Ruby and I did the legwork to put in the solar panels two years after we moved in. They paid for it and they get the benefit on their electric bill. Each strand of the web that ties us together has a negotiation that is connected to it."*

- Andy Simon

This multi-generational interdependence is entirely intentional and all of them recognize that these dynamics will continue to shift over time.



*Ruby Perry, Andy Simon, and their granddaughter in their ADU Greenhouse*

*“It sort of, for us, goes without saying, but it should be said that the relationship we have with our daughter and son-in-law is one that will let us mature into a less interdependent relationship with us. They are committed to caring for us...It’s not our plan to move into a retirement home. We are planning to die here, so we built this with that in mind, to avoid having to go somewhere else to finish our lives.”*

- Ruby Perry

Andy and Ruby imagine that the use of the ADU may change over time as well. Ruby says “assuming our daughter keeps the space after we die, perhaps it could be a rental unit, or maybe a teenager dwelling.” In this way, the ADU provides housing flexibility for their family for generations to come.

So what advice do Ruby and Andy have for someone considering creating an ADU on their own property?



Ruby says: “It’s doable. You can. The city does not make it easy. The city has a mutually beneficial relationship with developers, large scale developers. If the city was more supportive in actual practicality, not just in words, that would make a difference.”

Andy adds: “One of the things people should know in thinking about an ADU is that you do have to push and not let the old ways of doing prevail. The winter we were doing the planning and permitting we were running into a lot of push back from the city. I thought to myself ‘we lived in France for two years and got used to dealing with bureaucracy and we may be challenged, but there is no way we're going to lose this battle with the city; we’ve been training for years to do this bureaucratic pas de deux.’ We had the skills, the persistence, and the motivation.”

One final note, Andy and Ruby's ADU was featured in an article called “[Will Micro Homes Multiply in Burlington?](#)” in the local newspaper Seven Days in December of 2015 in case you’d like to read even more about Ruby and Andy's ADU.