



LIFESTYLE

# Ready to build or rent out an ADU? Here's how to win over nervous neighbors



Milla Goldenberg stands in the kitchen of her garage-turned-ADU in Highland Park. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

BY KEITH WAGSTAFF

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A refuge for aging parents. Rental income for your golden years. There are plenty of good reasons to build an accessory dwelling unit, also known as an ADU. But don't assume everyone will be cool with it.

Like Wilson behind the fence on "Home Improvement," neighbors are lurking. Legally, in California, they can't stop you from building an ADU — provided it [meets state requirements](#). But they can make your life hell. "Do everything by the book" or complaints to the city could derail your project, warned a marketing professional in Glendale, who wished to remain anonymous to avoid further conflict.

Once he started construction on his ADU, he said, neighbors yelled at him and his contractor and regularly reported minor infractions. At one point, a drone mysteriously crashed into his garage. Despite the stress, his permits were in order, and now he's renting the space out.

Neighbors have reason to be nervous about ADUs: They can be a terrible inconvenience. Construction can drag on for months or years. Loud tenants can disrupt a quiet block. And an extra car isn't going to make street parking easier to find. That's why it's a good idea to smooth things over before the digging starts.

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“Just treat people the way you want to be treated and it will be reciprocated,” said actor Alain Uy, who can be seen in “Power Book IV: Force” on Starz. He and his wife nearly have the permits to start building an ADU in the backyard of their Glassell Park home. But he didn’t wait until work began to reach out to people in his neighborhood. He started that process three years ago, sharing detailed construction plans and even offering to buy tarps to cover his neighbor’s vintage cars.

Being considerate can help you avoid years of icy stares and awkward encounters. Follow these tips and maybe your neighbors will return the favor when they build ADUs of their own.



A backyard view of the wood decking and large windows at Joanna Verneti's two-story ADU. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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Talk to your neighbors. Or have someone do it for you.

Reaching out to neighbors before construction comes highly recommended. If you're already pals, congrats! Your job is pretty easy.

"If your relationship with your neighbors is rocky, particularly with the ones that border your property, it's even more important to extend an olive branch," said John Geary, co-founder and CEO of [Abodu](#), which makes and installs prefabricated ADUs. Predictably,



not everyone enjoys dealing with prickly neighbors — or any neighbors, for that matter.

“I don’t know why I feel so self-conscious about going out and knocking on doors,” said Marisa Hearn, a teacher in Harbor City. In 2022, she built an ADU for her mother. Her project manager at DeSisto Construction contacted her neighbors for her.

“It was nice because he’s a professional, he does it all the time,” Hearn said. “He’s always dealing with people in neighborhoods. And so I was like, ‘Oh, it’s nice that he’s handling this and I don’t have to worry about it. Perfect.’”






The back patio of Milla Goldenberg's ADU in Highland Park. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)







A view out of Joanna Verneti's ADU's living room window toward the main house. (Brian van Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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## Share your story

Talking to neighbors is a good idea. But what should you tell them? “I think personal details help,” said Denise Pinkston, founder of [Casita Coalition](#), an organization that encourages ADU construction.

“For example, my neighbors built an ADU. They are from a country that is war-torn. They needed money to put their kids through college and they intended to rent the unit to people coming from their war-torn country,” said Pinkston. “Homeowners might build an ADU because they need the money to pay their mortgage or their family expects a job disruption or they’re about to have a kid or they have aging parents.”

The lesson: “Telling a human story about why a family wants an ADU really helps create understanding between neighbors.”

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## Come bearing gifts

Before writer-editor Leigh Niles Reason began construction on her ADU in Burbank, she baked her neighbors cookies. Then construction dragged on. To ease the pain of delays, she gave them a \$100 gift card to nearby Prime Pizza, the acclaimed [New York-style mini-chain](#). Overall, it went smoothly.

Pizza isn't guaranteed to prevent conflict. But it can't hurt. In general, small gifts are a great way to make any kind of disruption from neighbors more palatable, suggested Chiara Riggs Sill, founder of [Etiquette Moderne](#), which offers etiquette courses across California.



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“It’s not the cost of the gift that matters, it’s the thought you put into it,” Sill said. It’s best to tailor your gift to the individual. Don’t know them? She suggested something neutral, like a bottle of olive oil or a floral arrangement. (Not everyone drinks, she said, making wine a risky choice.)

No matter the gift, a handwritten note is a nice touch. Preferably with your contact information and specifics about construction, leading to the next suggestion ...



The exterior of Milla Goldenberg's ADU at her home in Highland Park. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

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## Assure neighbors construction won't last forever

Ambiguity is not your friend. Alexis Rivas, co-founder and CEO of [Cover](#), which installs customizable, modular ADUs, said his best advice for clients is to share a timeline. Neighbors fear construction projects that never end. Giving them a timeline can alleviate those fears. Here's the catch: It has to be accurate or resentment can build.

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# A prefab ADU behind a historic Hollywood hideaway allows generations to stay connected

June 29, 2023

“Do your due diligence,” said Sam Pratt, vice president of construction at [Samara](#), a prefabricated ADU manufacturer.

Whether you choose a prefab option or not, he recommended asking around for how well ADU companies stick to promised deadlines.

“Talk to their customers, talk to two of their customers, three of their customers,” he said, to make sure you trust they’ll finish your project in a timely, professional manner.

If your neighbors are particularly sensitive about construction time, you might want to go the prefab route. Building a traditional ADU can take anywhere from four months to more than a year, according to the companies and homeowners interviewed for this story. Most makers of prefabricated ADUs, however, minimize the amount of time spent on your property by building the structures in their own facilities and installing them [via massive crane](#). Pratt said Samara’s crews need to be on-site for only 30 working days, about six weeks total.

Good fences (and hedges and design) help



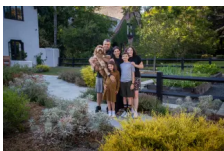




Artwork and a view out the mid-landing stairwell window of Joanna Vernetti's two-story ADU in Larchmont, with podocarpus trees blocking view of neighboring homes. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

“It’s easy to design an ADU in a vacuum,” said Alex Czarnecki, founder-CEO of ADU firm [Cottage](#). But your neighbors have to live with those design decisions. Try to minimize your ADU’s impact. Window placement is key, especially in walls that face adjacent yards. That’s even more true for two-story structures, like the one TV producer Joanna Vernetti built on her property near Larchmont Village for her three teenagers.

“Pretty much all of our windows face down into our driveway or into our backyard,” she noted, a choice she made with architecture firm [Assembledge+](#). “There’s nowhere you could stand and look out on someone else’s property.” Speaking of being able to see the neighbors, Czarnecki noted that while fencing and hedges can be “surprisingly expensive,” they “make a really, really big difference in terms of privacy and goodwill.”



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Another potential problem: A steep, pitched roof might block your neighbor's view or sunlight, said Rivas. Think low and flat to preserve the peace. Once your plans are final, show them to neighbors to convince them your ADU won't disrupt their lives.

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Keep lines of communication open

Unexpected things happen. Just keep your neighbors aware of them. Milla Goldenberg, a Realtor with [House Hunter L.A.](#), endured a long ADU construction process that was delayed when her first contractor had a heart attack. During that time, large trucks would occasionally park on her narrow street in Highland Park. She contacted her neighbors every time it happened.





The living space of Milla Goldenberg's ADU. (Christina House / Los Angeles Times)

“I just gave everybody a heads-up, like, ‘Hey, in case you want to move your car or are having people over or something.’ I think that was helpful, just showing my neighbors that courtesy,” she said. “I never got any pushback at all.”

Having a good relationship with your contractor helps, especially if a crew gets noisy or messy. “When my next-door neighbor complained, I always had the ability to call the contractor’s office,” said Thomas Glick, a retiree who worked with Cottage to build his ADU in Sherman Oaks. “They’d call their main guy and he would tell his people to turn down the music.”



Whether it's you or a project manager fielding emails, texts and calls, it's vital that *someone* is available to address your neighbors' concerns.

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## Choose your tenants wisely

Moving your mom or children into an ADU is an easy sell. But a stranger? That can make neighbors nervous. If you're going to rent your space, stress that you're being picky about who will live there. Before construction started, Goldenberg told her neighbor that she "would vet tenants carefully, because my family literally lives across the driveway."

It also can be helpful to explain to neighbors how you'll choose and educate tenants. Sill, the etiquette coach, suggested spelling out the neighborhood's social norms around parking and noise to prospective tenants — and explicitly spelling out the rules in rental agreements.



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July 6, 2022

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Neighbors are fine with Joyce Higashi renting her ADU in San Jose to traveling nurses, partly because she interviews them first on Zoom and has to live with them on her property. “One of my tenants actually became better friends with my neighbors than I did,” she said.



Joanna Vernetti looks out the bedroom window onto her backyard inside the two-story ADU on her Larchmont property. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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You can't win everyone over

Sometimes, you have to be OK with a neighbor not liking you. In Burbank, Reason's overtures were warmly received by her neighbors

... except one. “He would yell at the construction people,” she said. “He would yell at us. He was just really angry.”

Things turned out for the best. Before construction ended, the guy moved out, and she found herself with new neighbors. “The irony,” she said, “is that the people who moved in started to build an ADU.”



Keith Wagstaff

Keith Wagstaff is an experienced journalist who previously worked as a reporter for TIME and NBC News, and as tech editor at Mashable. His work has also appeared in GQ, New York Magazine, The Wall Street Journal Magazine, Popular Science, VICE and many other publications. He was born in Los Angeles and cut his teeth in journalism at USC’s Daily Trojan.