

Secret Passages

Alleys are a reminder of Santa Cruz's past

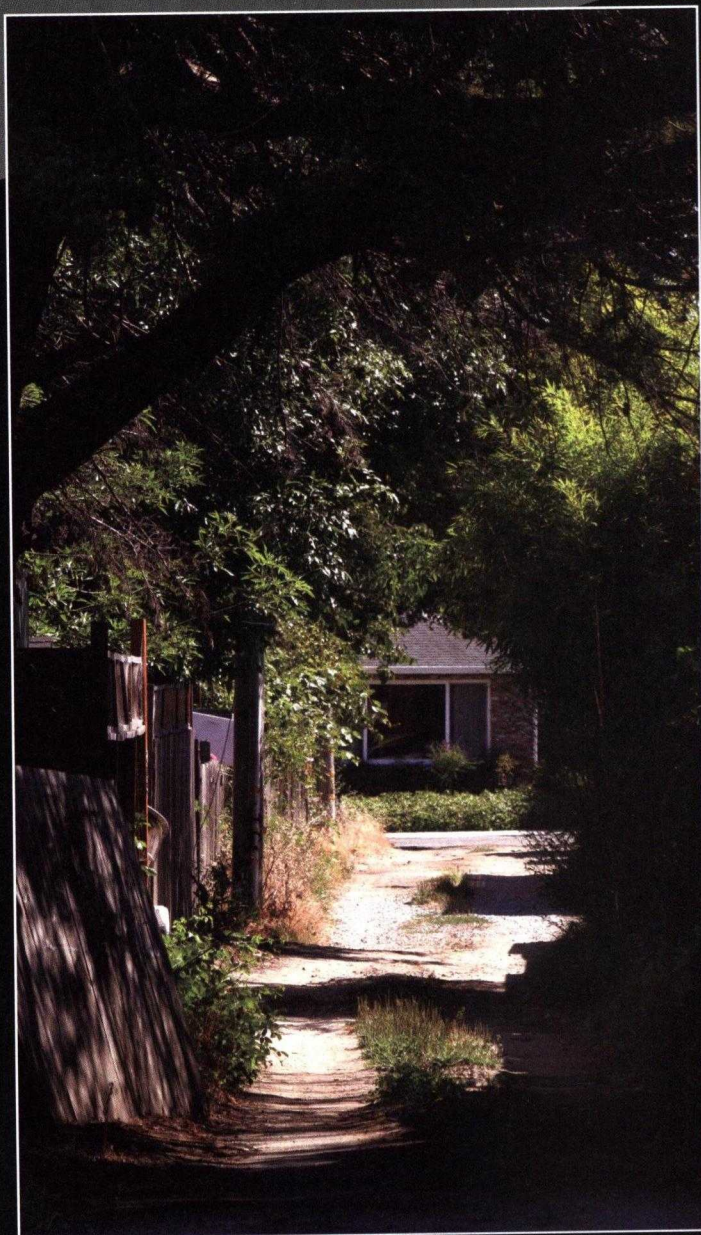
Back when land in Santa Cruz County was plentiful and cheap, subdividers laid out lots with long alleys running behind them.

Some 30 to 40 miles of alleys criss-crossed the city of Santa Cruz alone. The alleys were like mini-streets, allowing homeowners to park their cars in garages that sat behind their homes and to get garbage pickup without leaving cans out on the street. Some of the alleys served as elongated playgrounds for kids.

But with the rise of the automobile culture in the '50s, alleys fell out of favor. Big garages took over, forcing their way, like pushy relatives, to the front of houses. New subdivisions didn't include these narrow backyard lanes and the alleys that remained were sometimes swallowed up by homeowners anxious for a few extra feet of property. They also got reputations as places for drug dealers and thieves.

"We turned our backs on alleys," said Mary Alsip, associate planner for the city of Santa Cruz.

Today, many of the county's alleys are overgrown lanes dotted with sagging wood garages, rusted vehicles and potholes that turn into small ponds in winter. Some of them go nowhere, ending in a fence or landscaping



Weeds fight for control of a lonely dirt-and-gravel alley on Santa Cruz's Eastside near Parnell Street. These passageways are a forgotten part of the Central Coast.

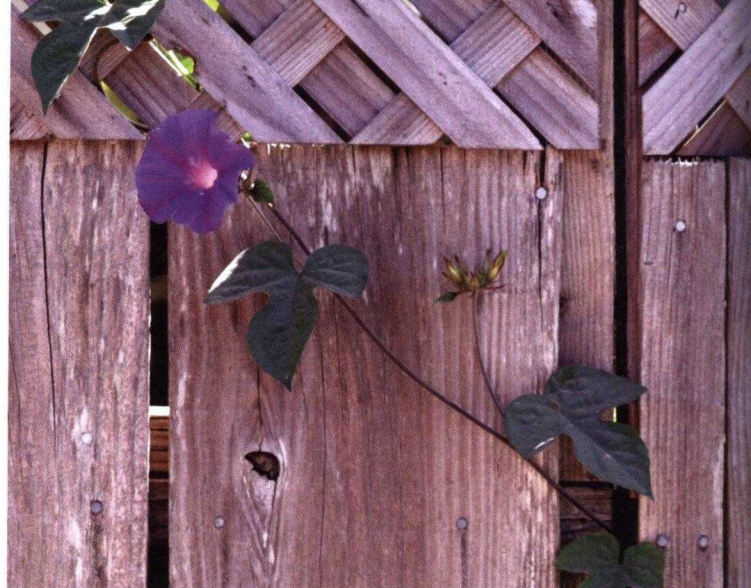
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installed by a homeowner — sometimes without permission.

They lie on the Westside of Santa Cruz, in Prospect Heights, in the Seabright area, in downtown Santa Cruz and in Pleasure Point.

But alleys are gaining favor again as part of a movement called New Urbanism — and have their fans in Santa Cruz too.

New Urbanism's planners see alleys as a way to give focus back to the home instead of a garage where two beefy SUVs reside, and to encourage people to be in their front yards where they can get to know their neighbors and build community. Officials in Portland, Ore., have even banned these garage-dominated "snout houses" in favor of homes with friendlier facades.

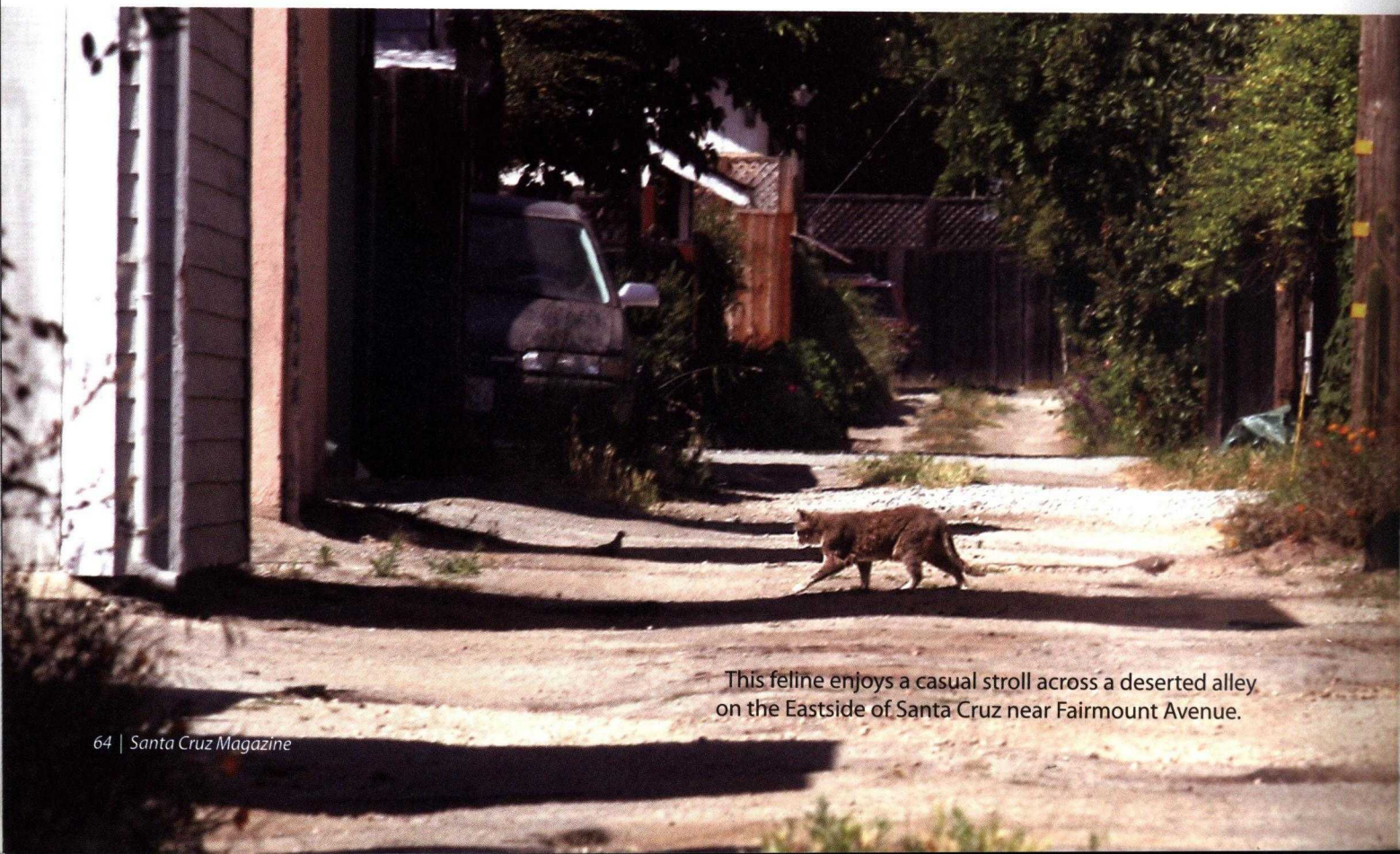


A morning glory vine creeps over a fence that lines one of the alleys near Mission Street.

Santa Cruz planners like alleys as a way to provide access to granny units built in backyards and to provide quiet places for families to walk or ride bikes. Some envision paved alleys lined with low fences and speckled with quaint granny units, turning them into quiet, European-style lanes.

Santa Cruz also has revitalized several of its alleys downtown, decorating them with murals and plants to make them welcoming places to walk.

But for now, most alleys are a reminder of the past, a glimpse of forgotten byways and a way of life when cars were not king. 🐾



This feline enjoys a casual stroll across a deserted alley on the Eastside of Santa Cruz near Fairmount Avenue.



Alleys give a backstage look at beautiful gardens, quaint homes, old boats and sometimes rusting pickup trucks.



This alley, named after a coastal town where many of the city's first Italian fishermen were born, lies between Bay and Gharkey streets in Santa Cruz.