

LATEST NEWS
Top Stories
U.S.
World
Business
Markets
Technology
Sports
Entertainment
Health
Science
Politics
Offbeat
Weather
Raw News
ESPAÑOL
Generales
Financieras
Deportivas
Espectáculos
NEWS SEARCH
<input type="text" value="Search"/>
<input type="button" value="Go"/>
Archive Search
WEB SPECIALS
Multimedia Gallery
AP Video Network
Today in History
Corrections

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NYC asking developers to test tiny apartments

By SAMANTHA GROSS
Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) -- Maybe it's the urban dwelling of the future: studio apartments measuring no more than 300 square feet.

New York City planners believe the tiny units could be the answer to a growing population of singles and two-person households. And in a nation that's becoming increasingly populous and increasingly urbanized - and where people more frequently are creating a family of one - such downsizing may not stop here.



AP Photo/Edward Reed

Mayor Michael Bloomberg on Monday invited developers to propose ways to turn a Manhattan lot into an apartment building filled mostly with what officials are calling "micro-units" - dwellings complete with a bathroom, built-in kitchenette and enough space for a careful planner to use a fold-out bed as both sleeping space and living room.

If the pilot program is successful, officials could ultimately overturn a requirement established in 1987 that new apartments here be at least 400 square feet.

City planners envision a future in which the young, the cash-poor and empty nesters flock to such small dwellings - each not much bigger than a dorm room. In a pricey real estate market where about one-third of renter households spend more than half their income on rent, it could make housing more affordable.

Manhattan is the U.S. capital of solo living, with 46.3 percent of households consisting of one person, according to the 2010 census. City officials estimate that 76 percent of residents on the island live alone or with one other person - and such households are growing faster around the city than any other type of living situation. Officials attribute the trend in part to young professionals delaying both marriage and childbearing.

Around the country, more people are living alone than ever before. The solo living rate rose to almost 27 percent in 2010, according to the census.

In New York City, where long working hours can leave little time for home life, renters often sacrifice square footage to save money. The size of city apartments has been lampooned on television, with at least one sitcom showing characters living - literally - in a closet. Some New Yorkers, desperate for storage space and uninterested in the finer points of homemaking, turn their ovens into storage for clothes or other items.

Especially alone, paying New York City rents can be a challenge - and officials said they hoped smaller apartments would help ease the financial burden on residents facing average market-rate rents of \$2,000 per month for a studio and \$2,700 per month for a one-bedroom. Housing Preservation and Development Commissioner Mathew Wambua said he expected the micro-units would rent for significantly less.

Similar programs have been proposed in other cities. In San Francisco, developers are seeking permission to rent out apartments as small as 150 square feet.

Ultimately, the New York City program could be expanded to outer-borough neighborhoods where the apartments could provide safer options to the lower-income residents who are most at risk from the dangers of illegal subdivisions. With only 1 million studio and one-bedroom apartments available for 1.8 million one- and two-person households, the shortage is forcing low-income renters into illegal apartments that can become fire traps, Bloomberg said.

In recent years, small homes have been celebrated by design aficionados who argue that minimal space, less clutter and simpler living is both financially and spiritually freeing, but the idea of towers of tiny units raises the specter of an era in which poor residents were crammed into unsafe tenements where they could afford the rent.

City officials argued this proposal was utterly different from such wholesale warehousing of the poor.

"The tenement problem was big families in very small (spaces)," Bloomberg said. "We're not talking about that. We're talking about one or two people who want something they can afford, and they don't entertain or need big space."

Modern-day building codes and improved refrigeration and public health have changed what it means to live small, Bloomberg said. A typical mid-19th century tenement apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side might have been larger than one of the micro-units, measuring 325 square feet, but would have typically housed families with multiple children. The micro-units are to be leased only to one- or two-person households.

As long as living conditions are good, housing advocate Kerri White said she had no particular concerns about the program.

"The general attitude toward space and how we use space is very different in New York City," said White, a director for housing advocacy group Urban Homesteading Assistance Board. "People are used to living in smaller quarters."

Associated Press writers Mike Schneider in Orlando, Fla., and Garance Burke in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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