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San Francisco’s “Broom Closet” Apartments

by [vanessa chan](#)

It's a small world we live in. Urban dwellers in San Francisco may soon find that adage a reality as one Bay Area-based developer wants to take minimalistic living to a whole new level.

Let's face it. Every San Franciscan has at least one cringe-worthy horror story about apartment living. Every one of us has, at some point, crammed our lives into expensive, closet-sized apartments in sketchy neighborhoods with very horrifying roommates. San Francisco's vacancy rate is now close to zero and with rents up more than 23 percent year on year according to online real estate listing company [Zillow](#), things are looking far more dire than they ever have.

Patrick Kennedy, a veteran Bay Area developer, wants to help alleviate the city's housing challenge, by building what he calls “smart spaces” – energy- and design-efficient micro-apartments in San Francisco, complete with a bathroom, built-in kitchenette and enough space for a couch that folds out into a bed.

In an interview with Untapped Cities, Kennedy describes his ideal space as “entry-level urban living for a car-free household,” targeted at the huge influx of high-skilled technology workers flooding the city to work at places like Twitter, Zynga and other emerging Web 2.0 companies. Kennedy intends to build these smart spaces in the south and mid-Market Street areas of San Francisco and has two proposed locations on 9th and Mission and 7th and Folsom.

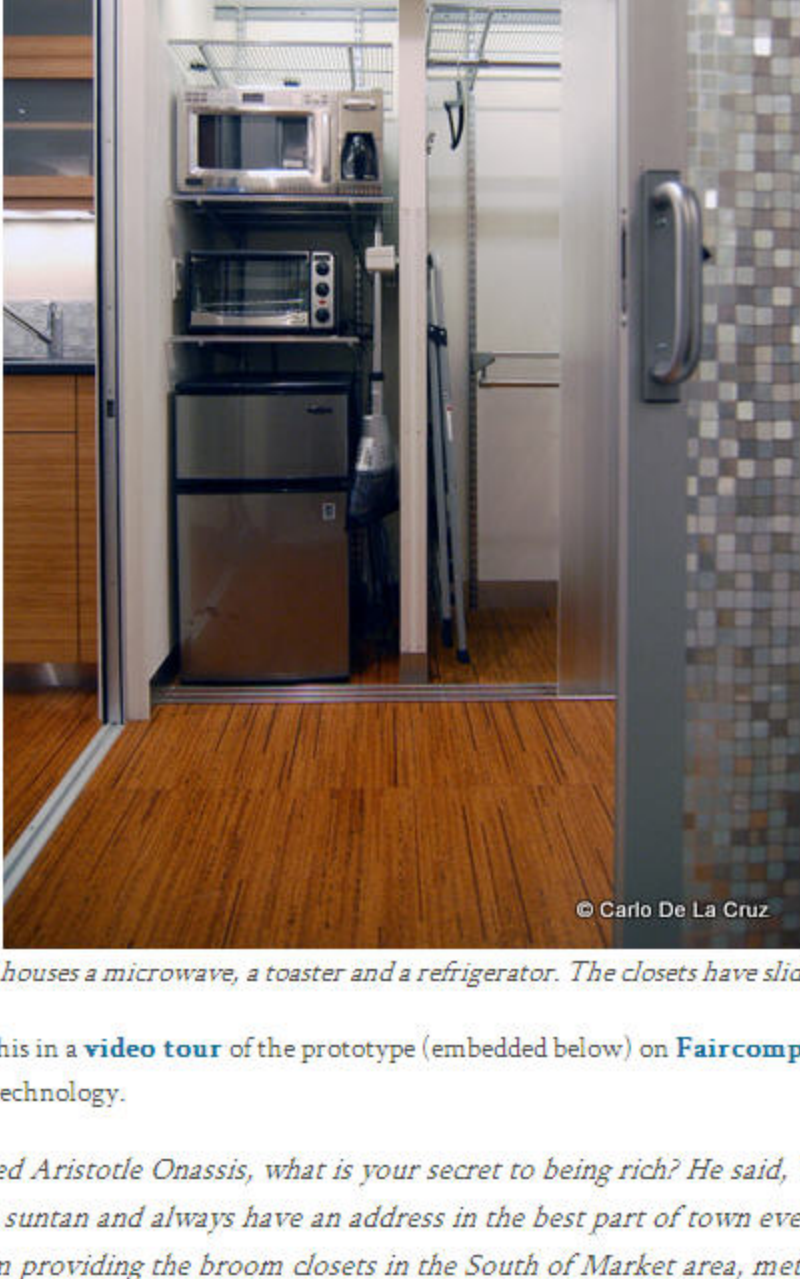
A storage unit in Berkeley, CA currently houses what Kennedy calls, [Smart Spaces 1.0](#), a prototype micro-apartment unit that is 160 square feet in total. True to its “smart” name, every square inch of space serves more than one purpose. A dining bench with elevated table space shrinks down flat to become a guest bed, the couch folds out into a queen bed, counter tops double as kitchen counters and work desks. Mirrors and a large Bay window work to provide illusions of space.



Veteran developer Patrick Kennedy lounges on a couch that folds out into a queen sized bed. Mirrors enlarge the space.

Each apartment comes with electronics and appliances such as a television, a microwave, a toaster oven and small refrigerator, all of which are neatly tucked away behind sliding door closets. These “smart” built-ins make 160 square feet of living space seem genuinely livable and at times seemed infinitely less cramped than certain dorm rooms and budget hotels. That said, despite the triple functionality of the built-in furniture, storage space is still limited.

Kennedy characterizes his ideal tenant as, “a young techie who come to San Francisco with nothing more than a suitcase, a computer, a toothbrush and a desire to succeed.”



An “appliance garage” houses a microwave, a toaster and a refrigerator. The closets have sliding doors to save space.

He expounds more on this in a [video tour](#) of the prototype (embedded below) on [Faircompanies.com](#), a video blog about sustainable technology.

“Someone asked Aristotle Onassis, what is your secret to being rich? He said, “Two things. Always have a suntan and always have an address in the best part of town even if it's a broom closet. Now I'm providing the broom closets in the South of Market area, metaphorically speaking.”



An MIT grad student gave the unit a trial run, living there for just under a month. Her feedback, which included “No” on the “Euro-style” shower above the toilet that drains right onto the bathroom floor and complaints about the kitchen sink being too small, will help inform the changes to version 2.0.

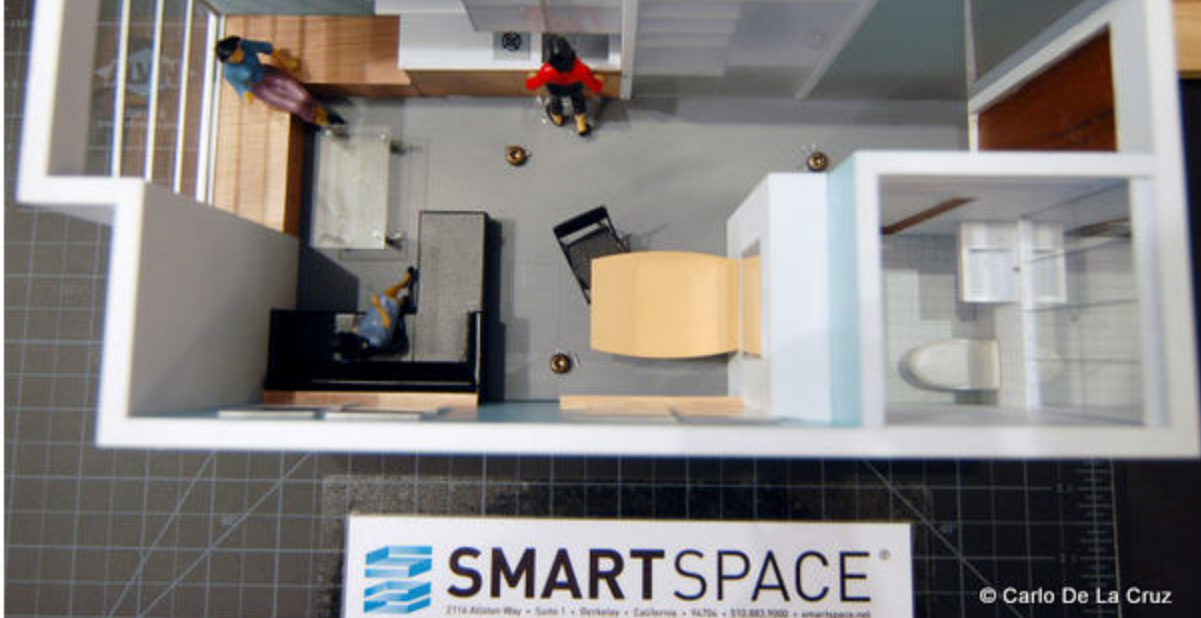


The Euro-style shower received low marks from Smart Spaces' first inhabitant, an MIT grad student.



The kitchen sink, which also received low marks, is large enough to fit two dinner plates. Kennedy plans to change this in Smart Spaces 2.0.

Kennedy says that Smart Space 2.0 will be a little larger, at 220 square feet and will include bigger sinks in the kitchen and bathroom, an actual stove instead of an induction cooker, a traditional tub-shower bath area and a pull-down Murphy bed.



A model of Smart Spaces 2.0, with a pull-down Murphy bed, a tub and a stove.

Kennedy expects to rent these tiny units for an impressive \$1,300 to \$1,600 per micro-apartment. While he calls this an “entry level price,” the stats say otherwise. According to a number of real estate services, the current average monthly rent for a San Francisco studio apartment is \$2,075 and the current average size of a studio is 493 square feet. That makes Kennedy's proposed micro-units nearly 40% more expensive per square foot than the average San Francisco studio apartment, and about a two-thirds smaller. In essence, these tiny, but expensive apartment units effectively target young, single, high-income city dwellers. Per city regulations at least 15 percent of these units will be designated BMR (industry-speak for “below market rate”) and these would go for \$910 a month.

With these rents, I ask him if he thinks this will cause even more pricing pressure on the already stressed rental market in San Francisco. Kennedy disagrees.

“I believe this is a way to relieve a lot of the pressure on single family homes and multi-bedroom apartments that are being bid up and cannibalized by groups of single individuals who have no other place to live and who join households together and bid up the price of all the existing housing. That demographic cohort, both the students and tech workers, could be quite adequately housed in smart spaces or efficiency dwelling units as they call them and not bid up the price of housing for families and lower-income people.”

Not everyone believes that this trickle-down solution will positively impact low-income and affordable housing rents in San Francisco. Gail Gilman, executive director of the nonprofit developer [Community Housing Partnership](#) told [SF Public Press](#) that she was skeptical of that narrative. The publication [notes](#):

“Gilman said for-profit developers want to build smaller units mostly because it's good for their business. Multifamily housing is less lucrative because there are fewer families that can afford to pay for large apartments at the rates landowners would like to charge per square foot. “I think that's why for-profit developers prefer smaller units with higher density,” Gilman said. “They have more of a return on their investment that way.”



A big part of these micro-units that Kennedy hopes to build is a significant amount of common space for residents to socialize. A good example of this is at the proposed project on 9th and Mission. The 11-storey building will have 12,000 to 15,000 square feet of common space comprising a 7,000 square foot roof deck, common areas on every floor and 4,000 square feet of lobby areas which will contain banquettes, communal dining areas and work rooms.

Although the arrangement seems to ignite visions of college dorm life, Kennedy insists that he isn't trying to cram a bunch of people into dorm-style living. He wants the residents to have social interactions and chance meetings. He says, “You're living in a small space but get to live large with other people, right here within your building.”

In the midst of all this, San Francisco's notoriously fickle Board of Supervisors has [postponed a vote](#) until September 25 on a proposal to amend the city's building code, to reduce the living space in apartments from 220 square feet to 150 square feet of living space, excluding kitchen, bathroom and closet. While certain to impact his project, Kennedy doesn't believe it is the be-all, end-all if the proposal does not go through. He will make the tweaks to his Smart Spaces project and remains adamant that the City of San Francisco wants and needs high-density, serviceable micro-dwelling units. He says about his project:

“Not only will [the Smart Spaces project] help ease the housing crunch in SF, it would also add a huge number of MUNI riders to the city's public transit revenue, add a lot of valuable property to the tax roll and be good for local businesses because these units put a lot of people in an area that doesn't have a large residential component. These new arrivals would be the new breed in the SOMA area.”

This emerging trend of micro-apartments is certainly not unique to the City by the Bay. Space-starved Tokyo, the same city that debuted [capsule hotels](#) a few years ago has introduced 30 square meter (approximately 323 square feet) [parking lot-sized single family homes](#) to support city living in a stagnant economy. In July 2012, New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg invited developers to participate in a [contest](#) to design micro-apartments measuring 275 to 300 square feet.

While all of this is certain to generate angry protestations from progressive housing rights activists, in some ways these kinds of developments are inevitable. As Kennedy says: “Many people will take 220 square feet in San Francisco compared to 2,200 square feet in another city.”

All photographs by [Carlo De La Cruz](#).