



Photograph by Martin Knowles Photo/Media

A 300-square-foot Vancouver apartment

Urban Planning

Micro-Apartments in the Big City: A Trend Builds

By Venessa Wong on March 14, 2013 | [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Google+](#)  84 Comments

Imagine waking in a 15-by-15-foot apartment that still manages to have everything you need. The bed collapses into the wall, and a breakfast table extends down from the back of the bed once it's tucked away. Instead of closets, look overhead to nooks suspended from the ceiling. Company coming? Get out the stools that stack like nesting dolls in an ottoman.

Micro-apartments, in some cases smaller than college dorm rooms, are cropping up in North American cities as urban planners experiment with new types of housing to accommodate growing numbers of single professionals, students, and the elderly. Single-person households made up 26.7 percent of the U.S. total in 2010, vs. 17.6 percent in 1970, according to Census Bureau data. In cities, the proportion is often higher: In New York, it's about 33 percent. And these *boîtes* aren't just for singles. The idea is to be more efficient and eventually to offer cheaper rents.

To foster innovation, several municipalities are waiving zoning regulations to allow construction of smaller dwellings at select sites. In November, San Francisco reduced minimum requirements for a pilot project to 220 square feet, from 290, for a two-person efficiency unit. In Boston, where most homes are at least 450 sq. ft., the city has approved 300 new units as small as 375 sq. ft. With the blessing of local authorities, a developer in Vancouver in 2011 converted a single-room occupancy hotel into 30 "micro-lofts" under 300 sq. ft. Seattle and Chicago have also green-lighted micro-apartments.

"In the foreseeable future, this trend will continue," says Avi Friedman, a professor and director of the Affordable Homes Research Group at McGill University's School of Architecture. A growing number of people are opting to live alone or not to have children, he says. Among this group, many choose cities over suburbs to reduce reliance on cars and cut commute times. "Many people recognize that there is a great deal of value to living in the city," he says.

Friedman calls the new fashion for micro-digs the "Europeanization" of North America. In the U.K. the average home is only 915 square feet. In the U.S. the average new single-family home is 2,480 square feet. The National Association of Home Builders expects that to shrink to 2,152 square feet by 2015.

Small living has deep roots in Japan, where land is scarce. "It's just the way things have always been done," says Azby Brown, an architect and author of *The Very Small Home: Japanese Ideas for Living Well in Limited Space*. Three hundred square feet may sound tight, but consider that Japanese families historically lived in row houses outfitted with 100-square-foot living quarters and large communal areas. After World War II, Japan's homes grew, though not much by American standards. By the late 1980s the average Japanese home measured 900 square feet.

Tight quarters demand ingenuity and compromise. Think of the Japanese futon or the under-the-counter refrigerator, a feature of European apartments. The Murphy bed gets a sleek makeover in a mock-up of a micro-apartment on exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York. The 325-square-foot space, designed by New York architect Amie Gross, also features a table on wheels that can be tucked under a kitchen counter and a flat-screen TV that slides along a rail attached to built-in shelves. Visual tricks such as high ceilings and varied floor materials make the space feel roomier.

The show, titled "Making Room: New Models for Housing New Yorkers," displays some of the entries from a design competition sponsored by New York's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. The winning team, comprising Monadnock Development, Actors Fund Housing Development, and nArchitects, secured permission to erect a 10-story building in Manhattan made of prefabricated steel modules. Some of the 55 units will be as small as 250 square feet. "The hope is that with more supply, that should help with the affordability of these kinds of apartments so that the young or the elderly can afford to live closer to the center and not have to commute so far in," says Mimi Hoang, a co-founder of nArchitects.

Although tiny, these properties aren't cheap, at least not on a per-square-foot basis. In San Francisco, where two projects are under way, rents will range from \$1,200 to \$1,500 per month. In New York, the 20-odd units for low- and middle-income renters will start at \$939.

Ted Smith, an architect in San Diego, says singles would be better served by residences that group efficiency studios into suites with communal areas for cooking, dining, and recreation. "The market does not want little motel rooms to live in," he says. "There needs to be cool, hip buildings that everyone loves and goes, 'Man, these little units are wonderful,' not 'I guess I can put up with this.'"

The bottom line: *Developers of micro-apartments are targeting urban professionals living alone. Quarters may be small, but rents are not.*

Wong is an associate editor for *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

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