

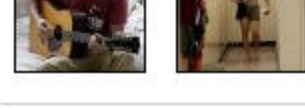
Startup dreams meet pop-up rentals

Nellie Bowles  
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Dan Stifler pays \$500 a month for a 7-by-5-foot laundry room off the kitchen in a Mission District flat. Photo: Brant Ward, The Chronicle



Daniel Marienthal, 23, lives in a Twin Peaks mansion with 11 other men, where privacy is so scarce that for a few months he lived in a canvas tepee he had built.

Josh Furnas, 23, has taken up residence in a converted closet, near the living room, in a Bayview apartment that he shares with an Ecuadoran family of seven.

Dan Stifler, 24, wakes up - under two faucets - in a Mission District laundry room.

This is the reality of pop-up housing in San Francisco, where young entrepreneurs, drawn to the promise of startup riches yet finding few affordable housing options, are inventing homes of their own - often in violation of zoning codes.

The situations are frequently absurd, but increasingly common: A posting on Craigslist recently offered the top bunk in a 23-by-9-foot room in the Marina for \$600 a month (for the bed's sake, there was a 150-pound weight limit). And while some landlords are kept in the dark about the extra occupants, others have seized on the income opportunity and divvy up their living rooms.

"During the Gold Rush, young men, even those from the better classes, thought nothing of coming to San Francisco and living in very uncomfortable positions, in bunkhouses and shanties. What we are seeing today rings similar," said San Francisco State historian Philip Dreyfus. "In San Francisco, the booms are so remarkable and dramatic, the busts so extreme. We've gotten used to it. But it is unique. Nowhere else has anything like this.

"When these young men get here, they live far below what their normal standards might be elsewhere. But it's funny, they don't seem to mind."

Poorer than their parents and scrappy by nature, this young generation of tech workers sees little value in suburban comfort. Their entrepreneurial individuality and interest in back-to-nature minimalism lends itself to inventive bedrooms, and there is a machismo to living uncomfortably, manifested by unlesurely things like standing desks. "Life-hacking," making quirky adjustments to everyday routines, is a common hobby.

The newcomers already have broken the laws around taxi services (with apps that allow anyone to be a cabdriver), music (their first CDs came free off Napster) and hotels (they often stay in unlicensed AirBnB rooms), so zoning codes are just another institution to drag into the 21st century. To them, occupancy limits are like copyright laws - simply obsolete.

But pop-up housing hasn't sprouted up just because it's a novelty. There's no element of hipster nostalgia for the old mining camp boardinghouse - and a laundry closet, no matter how subversive and revolutionary, is still a laundry closet. In many ways, pop-up housing is a necessity, even as some worry that these illegal arrangements could lead to abuse or unsafe conditions.

San Francisco's neighborhood associations, which favor low skylines, single-family homes and easy parking, work to prevent much in the way of new housing. Last year, the city added just 200 new units, said Sarah Karlinsky, policy director of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research. Yet the city grew by 7,500 people during that time, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

Some developers hoped to roll out a fleet of 220-square-foot micro apartments. The city approved them, only to place a cap on the number of units allowed: 375.

"In San Francisco," Karlinsky said, "land use is a blood sport."

But the young entrepreneurs appear undaunted. If San Francisco will not build enough new units, they will invent them. "Of course, I didn't think I'd come to San Francisco and live in a teepee," Daniel Marienthal said, "but I'm pretty happy I did."

Twin Peaks

Marienthal came to the city from San Diego two years ago hoping to build his startup, MeetCute, a dating service that creates movie-like romantic moments. He found his Twin Peaks "incubator" through a friend in December 2011 and moved in with his 11 roommates soon after.

Called Rise, the incubator is a home for entrepreneurs who want a communal, no-frills living space to build companies and start new ones. There are as many companies as there are occupants. Everyone keeps different hours (the business types wake at 7 a.m., programmers at 2 a.m.). There are no rules or regulations, but the unspoken code of conduct seems to be: live out of a single black suitcase, keep your bike against the wall, and try to invite girls to the parties.

"It's a little cheaper than a normal apartment, and I loved the community's vibe," Marienthal said. "Doing a startup is all about knowing the right people. I couldn't have started this company in San Diego."

For Marienthal, everything in the 6,800-square-foot house - the panoramic city views, his 11 roommates - was perfect. Except he had no privacy. So he came up with a unique housing solution.

"My friend and I saw a tepee on Pinterest. We analyzed how we might re-create it," said Marienthal, sitting on a leather sofa in the incubator's living room. "So we went to a hardware store and got some thick canvas and pipes and just started building it up."

He put the tepee - 6 feet tall, with a 7-foot diameter - around his bed. "I actually love the design," he said. "I've always been interested in Native American art."

The tenants at Rise are tight-knit. Some rooms are doubles, some have dorm-style bunk beds. The bedroom doors are always open.

Every morning, the young entrepreneurs mill around the coffee bar, gossiping about venture capitalists and launch parties. During the day, most work from the second-floor tables, which are covered with computers, Tostitos and earplugs. Sunday night is family dinner. All the residents take turns cooking. An outside service provides the cleaning, though the residents also have a low-lying, self-guided robotic vacuum called a Roomba that wanders the floor.

"Some things are more complicated. Bringing girls home requires coordination," said William Hsu, 24, who holds the lease and is Marienthal's roommate.

Indeed, Rise has struggled to attract women as tenants. "We don't want to be a frat house, but girls just kind of leave," Hsu said. There's still plenty of interest, and they have a long waiting list. Hsu is looking to rent another house in the neighborhood.

The Bayview

Every morning, Josh Furnas gets out of a curtainless basement shower room at his office. He opens his locker and pulls out a dress shirt. Deodorant is in his messenger bag. He carries a jar of peanut butter and a box of oatmeal down the hall and upstairs to his office, the Hub, a glossy communal work space in The Chronicle building.

At night, he bikes home to the Bayview neighborhood, where he sleeps in the living-room closet of an Ecuadoran family of seven. He falls asleep to "So You Think You Can Dance," playing on the TV outside.

Furnas has made a sport of living cheaply. He keeps a blog of his efforts to eat off \$3 a day, but says the increasing price of peanuts has driven that closer to \$4.

Once a wide receiver for City University of New York, Albany, Furnas started working for the Big Moose Deli in Hoosick Falls, N.Y., population 3,000.

"I was just managing a location," he said. "There was no possibility for expansion or change."

A friend from college had moved to San Francisco to start a company and asked Furnas to join him. When he came to the city, he first stayed with his dad's second cousin.

"But I needed to find my own room somewhere," he said. So he looked on Craigslist. Another young man - part of the middle generation of the Ecuadoran family - had posted his family's living room closet as a bedroom, listing the price at \$400 a month. Furnas took it.

There are challenges. The family speaks Spanish at home, and Furnas does not. The grandmother starts cooking at 7 a.m., while Furnas, making ends meet, often bartends till 3 a.m. Crime in the neighborhood, he said, is something he is always cautious about.

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"I have to be careful which streets I bike down," he said. And he's never invited anyone back with him.

"My date clothes are here at the Hub, ready to rock!"

His online artistic T-shirt company, Selfless Tee - which donates \$7 from every sale to different

charities - has made more than \$200,000 in sales so far, and he has just hired a third employee.

The Mission

After graduating premed from Columbia University, Dan Stifler came back to his hometown of San Francisco to look for biomedical engineering jobs.

Though his parents lived in the Sunset, he wanted to find his own place. So he looked up some old friends from University High School and heard that two of them had a room that had just opened up - a 7-by-5-foot laundry room for \$500 a month.

"Moving back home was not an option for me. I mean, it was, but I really didn't want to," he said. "Having a little independence, even if it means living in a laundry room, is worth it right now."

The laundry room is a glass-lined outcrop of the kitchen with good sunlight. His climbing shoes and an iPhone cord hang off a water faucet. His clothes are folded neatly in a small suitcase and two open cardboard filing boxes. Stairs to the upstairs apartment wrap around.

"I'm thinking of some hanging storage," he said. "Living here makes me more creative."

The apartment is zoned for only two occupants, making Stifler an illegal addition, hidden from the landlord. "I'm not allowed to be here. I'm here because it makes sense, not because it's legal."

For Stifler, being in the city, in walking distance of his favorite bars and the Mission Cliffs climbing gym, makes his compromises worthwhile.

"If I wanted to be able to afford a nice place, I'd go out to Oklahoma or something. Or Oakland. In Oakland, I could be living somewhere great," he said. "But I didn't come here to commute."

Stifler, who has not yet found a job, wouldn't want to see the city change its housing policy.

"One of the things that makes San Francisco special is that it has air and room to breathe. I don't want to see high-rises," he says. "Because even though the rent would go down, I wouldn't want to live here anymore."

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