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Time to Make Room

In New York, a third of all households are single people living alone; in San Francisco, it's 38 percent. Why aren't we designing housing for that demographic?



The tables, bed and seating in the 325-square foot microapartment can transform throughout the day so that space is utilized efficiently and creatively. The unit was on display at the Museum of the City of New York this spring. Photo courtesy John Halpern/Museum of the City of New York

Single people are taking over U.S. cities. The numbers are so staggering that it's hard to understand why housing policy has been so slow to react. In New York City, a third of all households are single people living alone. San Francisco beats New York at 38 percent, and Washington, D.C., Seattle and Denver top the charts for larger cities, with over 40 percent of their homes occupied by a lone resident. But even in smaller cities like Atlanta, Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, single people make up close to half of their households.

One reason it is difficult for policy makers, and the market, to digest these astounding numbers is our confused definition of household. Since the 1950 census, "household" has been synonymous with "family." Data splits households into family and nonfamily categories, relegating single people and their housing need to an oddity. This idea of household equaling family also keeps our housing supply frozen in the 1950s and even permeates our housing vocabulary, as in "multifamily buildings" and "single-family homes."

In New York City, as in many other cities across the country, housing regulations have worked to steadily increase the permitted minimum size of all new apartments over the last 60 years to encourage housing for families. Many areas of the city have a 400-square-foot minimum, and strict density controls on the number of units allowed in a building act as a disincentive to building smaller units.

However, due to our research and educational efforts, New York City policy makers have begun to explore housing options that better suit the needs of single adults. This resulted first in the development of a building of microapartments on East 27th Street in Manhattan. The pilot project of small studios between 250 and 350 square feet will test the impact of flexible space standards and of waiving density rules to accommodate more singleperson households. And many other cities are also catching on, with similar pilot projects of microunits being built in San Francisco, Boston, Seattle and Providence.

Some recent significant changes have led cities to reconsider the desirability of providing appropriate housing for a single population.

First, the government (and the market) is beginning to understand that the single population is incredibly diverse — and is not going away. There is a common preconception that single people are young and transient, and will eventually transform into a "real" household — a family. In fact, in New York City, only 19 percent of single-person households are under 35 years old. Twenty percent are 35–55 years old and just over 50 percent are over 55. People are marrying later if at all, and half of all marriages end in divorce. And the single elderly are almost entirely disregarded by the private marketplace.

As city officials begin to accept that singles are a permanent part of their population, they also start to understand the repercussions of failing to respond to single people's need for appropriate housing. If safe and legal housing options are not developed, single people are forced to live in shared arrangements in housing that is not designed for it.

To address these challenges, the Citizens Housing & Planning Council created a more realistic, demandbased analysis of how our population really lives. We found that a quarter of all New York City homes and apartments are being shared in some way. Adult children are staying in the family home for longer. Older single relatives are moving in with family members. Strangers are banding together to find housing through Craigslist, creating unnaturally high household incomes, which distorts the housing market by pushing up rental prices.

Many of these shared arrangements also rely on illegally occupied or subdivided housing. Illegal shared housing has become so widespread in New York City that the government estimates that the 2010 census resulted in an undercount of our population by approximately 250,000. Worst of all, illegal subdivisions have become a frequent cause of deaths by fire. The need for safe, legal housing options designed for the single population becomes paramount.

CHPC's Making Room initiative seeks to match a city's housing stock with the actual needs of its households. We have been honored to have an exhibition this year at the Museum of the City of New York (open until September 2013) that has educated thousands of attendees about new ways to allow our housing to respond to demographic change. We will continue to guide the New York City government as it moves from a pilot project to more substantial zoning and building code changes that would allow microapartments to flourish.



Photo: John Halpern/Museum of the City of New York

The tables, bed and seating in the 325-square foot microapartment can transform throughout the day so that space is utilized efficiently and creatively. The unit was on display at the Museum of the City of New York this spring.

Making Room includes four key areas of scrutiny:

1. How a city's population is really grouping itself into households, breaking with the traditional methodology that equates household with family
2. The type of people that a city hopes to attract in the future, and their likely lifestyles and housing needs
3. Best practices regarding the design of homes and apartments across the world
4. The revision of zoning, planning and building code controls, as well as subsidy policies, to facilitate and encourage the development of different housing models

In looking at these four areas, we can see that many of our cities need to revise their housing and planning policies to allow microapartments to address the needs of our booming single population across all ages and incomes.

Such innovative cities as San Francisco and New York must remain national leaders by making room for their real populations, both now and in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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