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Micro-apartment developments on rise in S.F.

Micro-apartment dwellers live efficiently in tiny spaces - planners see trend on rise

Carolyn Said | November 3, 2013

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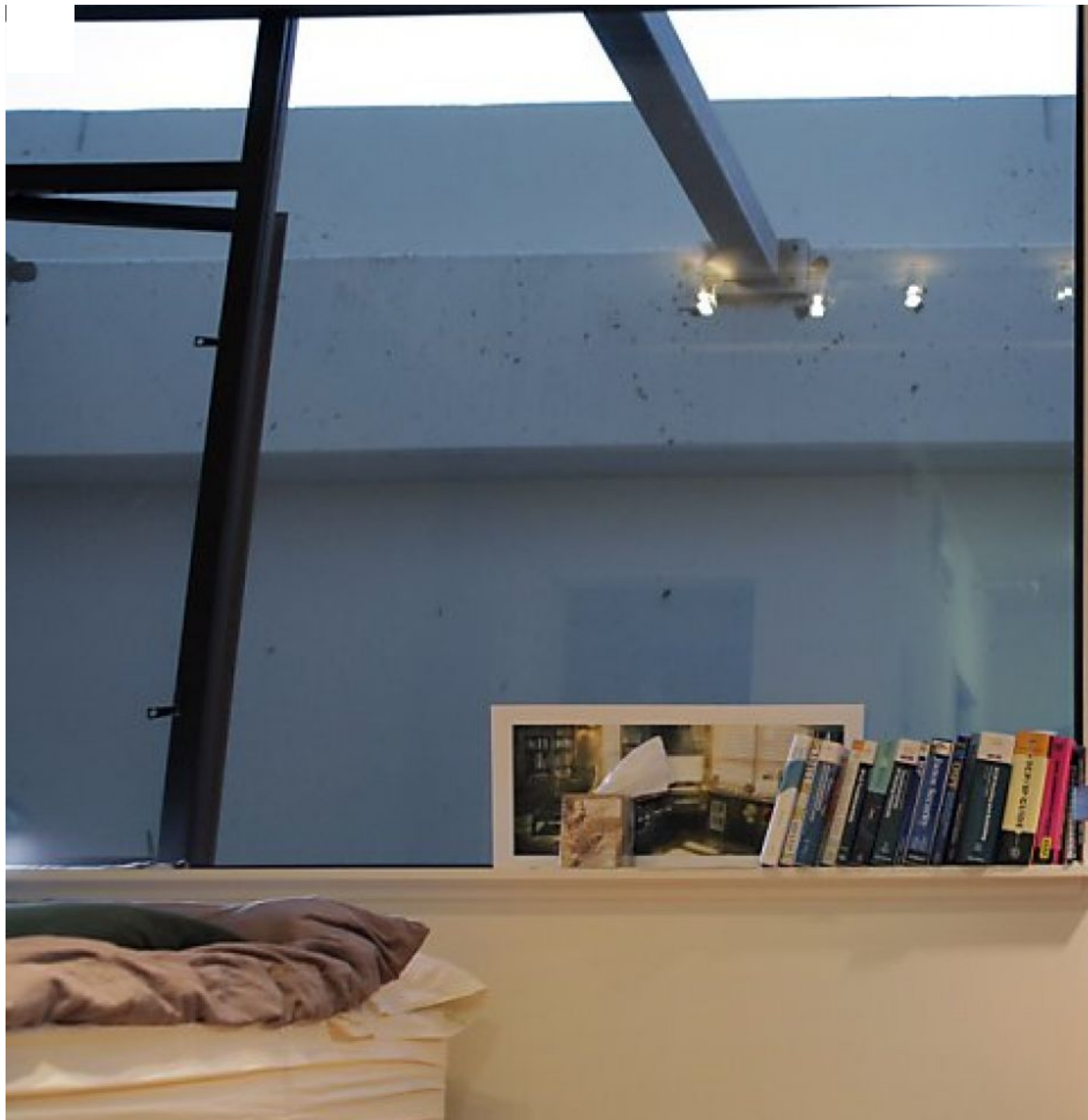
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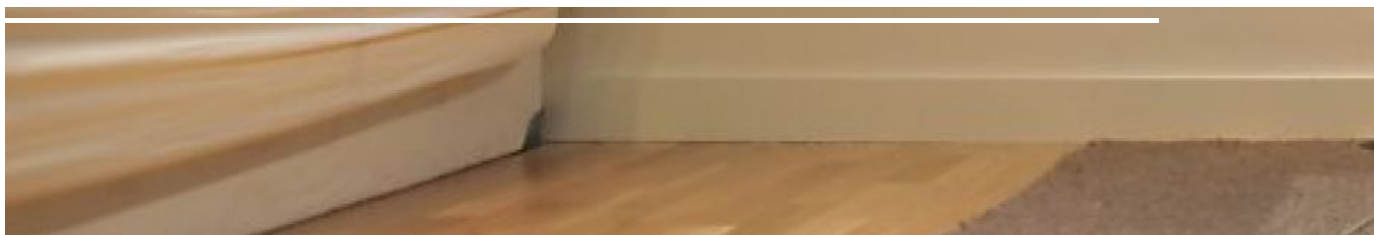
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Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronic

Kayla Smith orders groceries on her laptop. She replaced her desktop computer as part of paring her possessions. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez, The Chronicle

Kayla Smith, 35, has been out of college for years, but she's returned to dorm-style living in an apartment the size of a one-car garage in a brand-new building in San Francisco's Tenderloin.

"It's the price you pay for living in San Francisco," she said. She winnowed her possessions to the bare minimum when she moved into the 279-square-foot space in September, paying \$1,850 a month for the convenience of living blocks from work amid the emerging Mid-Market area.

Urban planners and San Francisco leaders say smaller units help tackle the city's housing shortage and rising rental costs.

"We need to think outside the box in providing housing for our population," said San Francisco Supervisor Scott Wiener, who sponsored legislation last year to allow "micro-apartments" of 220 square feet including bathroom, kitchen and closet. The city agreed that 375 micro-units could be built as a test; 120 are now in the pipeline in the Mid-Market area.

Meanwhile, plenty of the new apartment buildings are 400 square feet or less - not technically micro but still pretty darn small. By comparison, most studios have been 500 to 600 square feet.

"We need units of all different sizes," said Wiener, who lives in a 490-square-foot condo in the Castro and said it was cathartic to shed half his worldly goods when he moved in 10 years ago. "Not everyone wants or can afford a huge space. Forty percent of San Franciscans live alone."

The trend toward smaller apartments could have a bigger impact beyond that on the actual residents who opt to trade square footage for the chance to live solo in happening 'hoods.

"Smaller spaces require us to do a better job with the public realm," said Gabriel Metcalf, executive director of think tank San Francisco Planning and Urban Design. "Think of the Parisian model where people have less private space but the street life is glorious, with the sidewalks, the parks and the plazas making up for that."

He thinks San Francisco is well on its way to a similar model with its well-established neighborhoods and emerging planned areas such as the Market-Octavia corridor.

"It's not like we have to create this from scratch," he said.

'A little sanctuary'

Developer Patrick Kennedy of Berkeley's Panoramic Investments helped kick off the trend with a design called SmartSpace for ultra-efficient units where built-in furniture plays multiple roles. For instance, an updated Murphy bed converts to a dining room table.

He too sees the city as complementing the tighter quarters.

In urban core areas, "proximity and convenience is more important than size," he said. "The best amenity we have to offer is the city of San Francisco," he said. "If you move to a city, you want to partake of it so your actual domicile is not as critical in terms of space."

Alan Mark, president of San Francisco's Mark Co., said he advises folks in compact space: to "think of your apartment as your bedroom and the neighborhood as your living room."



Smith took that advice literally, setting up her single room as a Zen bedroom.

"I made the decision that I wouldn't entertain at home, and decided not to have a couch and dining table," she said. "This is just for me, like a hotel room, a little sanctuary where I can relax." She dumped her desktop PC for a laptop; pared two bulging bookcases down to eight volumes; and opted for just two bowls and two plates.

"When you live by yourself, you don't need as much stuff," she said.

Mark, who handles marketing for the Lofts at Seven - the new 88-unit rental complex where Smith lives - said innovative design can help offset a tighter footprint. He points to attributes such as high ceilings and big windows, as well as access to a landscaped roof deck with seating, grills, a gym and an outdoor cinema.

Filling a niche

Experts and proponents are quick to admit that micro-units are not for everyone - and probably not long-term dwellings.

"Micro and near-micro units are part of the solution, but they don't work for lots of types of households," said Jed Kolko, chief economist for real estate site Trulia.com. "Few people would raise kids in a 300-square-foot apartment. Micro-units will probably see more turnover than larger units."

Metcalf said he thinks smaller apartments could benefit bigger families by drawing tenants who previously doubled up as roommates in San Francisco's many flats, thus "freeing up some room in the multi-bedroom housing stock."

Kennedy's "SmartSpace" concept for smaller units is a reality at one location: 38 Harriet in SoMa, where California College of the Arts has leased all 23 units as student housing.

The undergraduates who live there two to each 295-square-foot unit "are ecstatic to have a place that's brand-new, state of the art," said David Meckel, director of campus planning. "Compared to a typical dorm room, they're like the Ritz-Carlton."

Next up: SoMa Central at Mission and Ninth will have 120 micro-units and 40 "micro-suite" - two- or three-bedroom apartments of 650 square feet.

While Kennedy originally said the micros would rent for \$1,300 to \$1,500, rising construction costs and surging San Francisco rents "makes that sound like pre-war pricing," he said. "Now \$1,300 gets you a room in the Tenderloin." The building will open in mid-2014; pricing is not set but will be "well below the \$2,700 average rent for new studios in San Francisco," he said.

"I think of micro-apartments as the architectural equivalent of the Smart Car: not for everyone, but serving a valuable need for certain households in many cities," Kennedy said. "It's the same rationale as switching to smaller cars with better mileage when gas hits \$4 a gallon. We're in an era where we can't afford to guzzle space like we used to, especially in high-demand area like San Francisco."

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