

Web Extra: Small Spaces

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Michael Webb explores the growing popularity of small spaces, including a microloft project in Vancouver by NMDA. Rendering courtesy NMDA.

By Michael Webb

As real estate values skyrocket, young professionals who want to live in the heart of big cities on a budget are increasingly drawn to micro apartments that provide them with a minimum of private space as an alternative to sharing. Living small is nothing new. The poor have always endured cramped quarters—from primitive huts to tenements or trailers—and the homeless are grateful for a modest room in an SRO. Le Corbusier and his wife spent many summers in their 12-foot-square cabin in Roquebrune. When he first visited India to design Chandigarh, the master said he couldn't improve on the versatility of the linear shacks that families construct from scavenged materials beside major highways. Little has changed since then. A few years ago, architect Bijoy Jain showed me through such a shelter outside his studio in Bombay; it was a marvel of ingenuity, impeccably maintained, and he was greeted as a welcome guest.

The average size of the American home has grown from 983 square feet in 1950 to about 2400 today, even though families are fewer and smaller. Other nationalities live more frugally. In Britain the average is 818 square feet and in Hong Kong it is only 484. That prompts the question: How much room do we really need? In Los Angeles, childless couples routinely commission mega-mansions to show off their wealth and actually use only a small part of them. As Leonardo da Vinci observed 500 years ago: "Small rooms and dwellings set the mind on the right path, large ones cause it to go astray." An affluent Spanish friend, living in Rye, NY, decided to test this idea and moved his family of seven from a mansion into Ulrich Franzen's first house, a compact modernist gem. Everyone adjusted to the downsizing and treated it as a great adventure.

For architects, the challenge is to create layouts that are efficient and livable, as they have in short-

term accommodations. Philippe Starck demonstrated a mastery of space planning when he transformed a women's dormitory into the Hudson Hotel in mid Manhattan, and guests now pay \$400 a night for tiny rooms that provide all the essentials for comfort and convenience. I stayed there when the price was \$99 and loved the way I could sleep, shower, shave, dress, and pack within a few steps. Commune recently performed the same feat for the Ace Hotel in downtown LA. Gregory Ain's 950-square-foot houses in Mar Vista were designed for workers' families in the 1940s, and they were so well planned that they now sell for over \$1 million to middle-class couples.

San Francisco—where technology has created a new Gold Rush, and 42 percent of the population is single—provides an ideal laboratory for living small. Fledgling techies spend most of their waking hours at work, in bars or clubs, and require little more than a bed, shower, clothes rack, and coffeemaker; for them, a large apartment or house would be an encumbrance even if it were affordable. Developers are eager to exploit this new market, but are constrained by a jungle of planning restrictions and a wave of populist sentiment opposed to gentrification. This activism is well motivated, for social and economic diversity is an endangered quality in great cities. Creatives and a wide swathe of the middle classes are being priced out of San Francisco, along with minorities and the poor. In London and New York, the crisis is even more acute. City workers are compelled to live in exurbia, diminishing the quality of life they seek, impoverishing the centers, and squandering resources.

Clearly, the answer is to build more affordable apartments and densify cities. Micro-apartments could satisfy part of the demand, but they have to be intelligently designed. In Vancouver, where an influx of wealth from Asia has driven real estate values sky-high, an enlightened developer came up with the concept of micro lofts. Reliance Properties CEO Jon Stovell converted a derelict historic building into 30 units ranging from 226 to 291 square feet, which rent for around \$850 a month. The venture was an immediate success and won many awards. Other projects followed, and he recently commissioned Neil Denari to design a 380-unit tower downtown, which will include nano apartments as small as 185 square feet. Amenities must compensate for the compactness, Stovell insists. Each apartment takes its cue from the iPhone, packing high quality equipment into a small package. Shared spaces indoors and out complement the private rooms, and the tower has a richly varied urban location, with an abundance of restaurants and cafes.

For Neil Denari, whose last major project was the luxurious HL23 apartment tower overlooking New York's High Line, the challenge was to design from the inside out. "Because they are small, these apartments need to be well-lit from big windows, and offer a high level of comfort," he says. "The building has to have an urban presence, and be more than an icon of efficiency like the Nagakin capsule tower in Tokyo. However, for residents, the city is their living room."

Thirty-three architectural firms entered a competition initiated by Mayor Bloomberg for 300-square-foot apartments in New York, and it's likely that his successor will push even harder to foster innovative housing solutions. In San Francisco, the city authorities are part of the problem. In 2012, they revised their minimum space requirements to permit apartments as small as 220 square feet, but cautiously capped their number at 375. Panoramic Interests, a Berkeley-based developer, has already demonstrated their viability. CEO Patrick Kennedy was inspired by vacation trips he took with his wife and child in a 78-square-foot Airstream trailer. "It provided all we needed for a few weeks and it gave me the idea of building smaller apartments," he recalls. "We want to provide affordable, entry-level housing at the right size. It's the Goldilocks principle—not too big, not too small.

Kennedy spent five years perfecting the concept, building a full-size mock-up in a warehouse, and inviting an MIT student to live there for three weeks and provide a critique. Based on her feedback and his own research, he built an infill of 23, 295-square-foot apartments, which were soon snapped up. The furnishings are exemplary. There's a queen-size pullout bed, and a table that can accommodate four diners, or lower to become part of a bench that doubles as a guest bed. A sliding door conceals high-end appliances, and storage cabinets are built in. A more ambitious project, the 11-story Panoramic, should be completed next summer. Located in SOMA, two blocks from the Civic Center, it comprises 160 studios and mini-suites with 9-foot ceilings and a high level of sustainability. There are public lounges on every floor, a rooftop garden and a ground-floor café-lobby. A BART station, bike storage, and a City CarShare make parking redundant. "I'm curious to see if older people will be interested in renting along with young singles," says Kennedy. "I think they will."

Given these early successes, the concept of micro-apartments is bound to catch on, making cities livelier, greener, more compact and inclusive. Developers and designers are ready to act once the politicians and bureaucrats step out of their way.

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