

# Co-Living is Coming to San Francisco

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As we are all well aware, housing is the Bay Area's burning topic of the day. The housing shortage is reported by local and national news, and you can't walk down the street or ride on BART without overhearing multiple people discussing how the housing crisis is affecting them. How the Bay Area will house everyone is a serious question. SFHAC, in conjunction with SPUR and AIA San Francisco, assembled this panel to consider if and how group housing can play a part.

- Kearstin Dischinger / San Francisco Planning Department
- Danelle Guthrie / UC Berkeley
- Mark Macy / Macy Architecture
- Michael Yarne / Build Inc.

For context, group housing was defined in Section 209.3 of the 1978 [San Francisco Planning Code](#), which stated: "*Group housing, boarding: Providing lodging or both meals and lodging, without individual cooking facilities, by prearrangement for a week or more at a time and housing six or more persons in a space not defined by this Code as a dwelling unit*". According to Dischinger of the San Francisco Planning Department, the current code distinguishes group housing from a dwelling unit by whether the unit has an oven—plain and simple. If there is no oven, the housing is exempted from rear yard, exposure, and inclusionary requirements, and the open-space requirements are reduced. Wherever tall, dense buildings are permitted, group housing is allowed as well—that is, clustered in the Eastern neighborhoods and along transit corridors. Group housing can be implemented in the re-use of existing buildings, or in new

construction. It can take on a number of different forms and has the potential to address housing needs across a range of incomes, ages, and cultures.

Guthrie, an architect and professor at the University of California, Berkeley, shared the research her studio did on group housing. In the past 100 years, group housing manifested in many forms and from many motivations: social, religious, educational, recreational, institutional, and economical. Of course the last aspect, economy, is the impetus for the current conversation surrounding group housing in San Francisco. Guthrie's research studio found that two qualities are necessary for successful group housing—the design must encourage community and the building must provide the common facilities integral to daily life.

Yarne, Principal at Build Inc., addressed the issue of group housing's negative association with tenement housing. The tenements of the 1900's were overcrowded and often riddled with disease. Such buildings provided inadequate sanitation and extremely limited access to fresh air and daylight. The word "tenement" acquired a pejorative meaning and became associated with "disease, sexual immorality, sloth, and divorce." This negative association seems to have carried over into the present day discussions about group housing and micro-units. Even in ostensibly progressive San Francisco, many people express immediate negative gut reactions to the idea of people living in small micro-units or dense group housing, despite the City's much-improved regulations of access to fresh air, daylight and modern-day sanitation.

Macy and Yarne shared a [potential group-housing project](#) designed for west SOMA that consisted of 'micro' housing units that have one living/sleeping room, a small bathroom and a small kitchenette (with no oven). The units are connected to a larger shared living, kitchen and dining space—a typology that more resembles a hotel than a multi-family housing project. The project showcased the potential of increased density by eliminating most horizontal circulation and providing shared common spaces. There are many questions regarding how this housing typology is regulated, how it is managed and how it is designed. Yarne seems to think that one answer may be a professional cleaner to take care of the common areas and the power of social media to 'self-regulate'.

While it is true that not everyone would desire to live this way, we must provide options in our housing stock, and this solution may be desirable to many people. While group housing is not a new concept for San Francisco, it is ripe for redefinition and reconsideration. It could be a critical tool for creating housing across a range of incomes.

"Group housing", "co-housing", "co-living". Whatever we call it and however we refine it and regulate it, some version of communal living has a part to play in any comprehensive plan to resolve today's housing crisis.

### **About the Author**

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