



**REAL ESTATE**

# Home Shrunk Home

## Micro-Apartments, Tiny Homes Prefabricated in Brooklyn

By NATALIE SHUTLER FEB. 20, 2015

For most single New Yorkers, the tyranny of living in a small space, or worse, a shared space, is all too familiar.

And with the number of single New Yorkers growing, the demand for more of these spaces is inevitable.

Enter My Micro NY, the city's first micro-apartment complex, at 335 East 27th Street, with 55 units ranging from 260 to 360 square feet. The building will begin leasing studios this summer for around \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month.

My Micro NY, made of prefabricated modular units built at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, will be stacked into place this spring. The apartments will come with kitchenettes, wheelchair-accessible bathrooms, ceilings over nine feet high and big windows. And to help make living in a small space more palatable, tenants will have access to storage units and common spaces scattered throughout the building.

To allow this building to come to be, the city had to waive current zoning and density rules that limit apartments to no less than 400 square feet.

The project is being watched with interest by both housing advocates and developers, and not just because of its modular construction. Housing advocates say the creation of more micro-apartments could open up many more reasonably priced living options. More units dedicated to singles could eventually bring down rent prices across the city, as more two- to four-bedroom apartments would then open up to families. Singles looking for larger apartments to share with others may have artificially inflated the rental

market, as the combined incomes of roommates can be greater than those of families.

Some developers have a related idea on the drawing board, “micro-suites,” or apartments that are slightly larger than the legal limit — at, say, 500 square feet — but house two or three singles in separate, albeit tiny, bedrooms.

Whether New Yorkers can live (and happily, at that) in less than 400 square feet is not really in question — many New Yorkers already do. Micro-apartments that were built before the zoning rules were enacted in 1987 exist throughout the city. There are some 3,000 apartments under 400 square feet in Manhattan alone, according to Jonathan J. Miller, the president of Miller Samuel, a real estate appraisal and consulting firm.

Kelli Okuji, 27, a graduate student at Columbia University, lives in one, a newly renovated apartment of 313 square feet at the Greystone, a former hotel built in 1923 on the Upper West Side that has since turned its rooms into luxury rentals. Ms. Okuji occupies one of 26 efficiency units under 400 square feet, each of which comes with high-end finishes and appliances, a Murphy bed that tucks into the wall and access to a broad variety of building amenities, including a gym and a landscaped rooftop lounge.

“For me, the draw was living on my own,” said Ms. Okuji, who is from Aptos, Calif. “I had been crammed in an apartment with three other girls, and as I have lived with roommates for eight years, since my freshman year of college, I was ready to do my own thing.”

Rent is \$2,600 a month, so Ms. Okuji knew she would not be saving money so much as buying the privacy she needs to complete her master’s degrees in business administration and international affairs.

She was also taken with the design of the apartment. “I was really impressed with how everything is configured,” Ms. Okuji said. “I think it is great that the bed can go up; it really opens up the space.”

The miniature appliances easily accommodate the needs of one person: “The dishwasher looks like a regular drawer, and a mini-oven doubles as a microwave,” she said. “The only drawback is the size of the bathroom: The sink is tiny. But having amenities in the building were icing on the cake.”

Indeed, amenities may be key to the success of micro-apartments. “Amenities have become much more important to people as apartments have gotten smaller,” said Cliff Finn, the executive vice president of new development at Douglas Elliman, and the leasing agent for the Greystone. “They have become an extension of living space. People are prepared to make the space trade-off if they have other places to go.”

Many of the new towers that have popped up in Brooklyn and Queens also attract renters with add-ons and common spaces. The firm that designed My Micro NY, nArchitects, has given them community spaces including studies, small gardens, a gym, and a laundry center and storage for bikes and overflow belongings.

The firm won a closely watched design competition in 2013 that was sponsored by the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development and enthusiastically endorsed by former Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. It is being built by Monadnock Development and the Lower East Side People’s Mutual Housing Association.

Demand for these apartments seems clear: Eric Bunge, a principal at nArchitects, said that after winning the competition, his firm received dozens of calls from interested parties of all ages.

Mr. Bunge said his firm designed My Micro NY to accommodate tenants of all ages and all income levels — 22 of the units will be designated as affordable housing. The architects are hoping that sliding glass doors, high ceilings, lots of natural light and Juliet balconies will help alleviate any feelings of claustrophobia.

The current zoning rules were enacted in 1987 to prevent a return to the days when overcrowded tenements filled many of the city’s streets. But Mr. Bunge said he believes that the large dwellings that began to be built nationwide after World War II are a historical aberration that has altered “how much space we think we need.”

The many two- to four-bedroom units on the rental market “actually better respond to the housing landscape of the 1950s,” when homes were designed for families, and not for today, said Sarah Watson, the deputy

director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council. Her organization has developed an initiative, **Making Room**, that explores expanding New York's housing options.

That means focusing on all the single people in the city.

In 2013, about half of all New Yorkers were single, up from about a third in 1970, according to an analysis of census and other data by Susan Weber-Stoger, a researcher in the sociology department at Queens College. The large number of singles here corresponds to a surge nationally, as more people are waiting to get married, if they do at all. At the same time, older adults are living longer, and often in single households. This, combined with the revitalization of many of America's cities, has created a housing crunch.

In New York, the Citizens Housing and Planning Council found that the pressure from what Ms. Watson considers "old-fashioned zoning laws" has led to widespread flouting of the law. "Most people sharing apartments together are in some way breaking the rules," Ms. Watson said. Any apartment that is subdivided among more than three people who aren't related is in violation of occupancy rules, for example, and many apartments have locks on bedroom doors, which in many cases blocks the fire exit.

According to a 2008 study, by the Pratt Center for Community Development and the Chhaya Community Development Corporation, more than half of the housing added in New York City from 1990 to 2000 was in this illegal "housing underground."

Matthew Baron, the president of Simon Baron Development, said he sees this as a "shadow market," which his firm plans to tap into with micro-suites for singles that are code compliant. In the next few months, the firm plans to unveil some 400 units featuring two- and three-bedroom suites designed to be shared that will average about 250 square feet per person. The average bedroom size will be 110 square feet, the suites furnished and the kitchens pared down with slimmed-down appliances; residents will have access to a host of amenities.

"People already live this way, by putting up pressurized walls and turning a two-bedroom into three, or a one-bedroom into two," Mr. Baron said. "We

are seeking to legitimize things for both the landlord and the tenant, while still breaking up the cost of rent.”

While it remains to be seen whether true micro-apartments, those under 400 square feet in size, will gain regulatory footing, Ms. Watson, of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, is optimistic. As part of his State of the City speech this month, Mayor Bill de Blasio emphasized affordable housing and sustainable density. Expanding the availability of compact units — or micro-apartments — beyond the pilot phase is part of his plan to bring down housing costs. Mayor de Blasio’s plan cites the success of “livable, safe, healthy” micro-apartment initiatives in other cities that have broadened “housing options for small households.” His administration has promised to consider zoning changes after a review of the My Micro NY pilot. In this administration, Ms. Watson sees “a broader commitment to encourage housing that better matches how people live,” beyond just finishing what former Mayor Bloomberg started.

Seattle is often held up as a leader in the micro-apartment movement. Units at developments there called aPodments can be rented on leases as short as three months, for around \$600 a month. But that model is unlikely to spread to New York, where leases are typically a year or two long and where financial requirements are so onerous that they often require the signature of a guarantor.

A potential barrier to zoning changes that would allow for micro-apartments, Ms. Watson said, comes from a misunderstanding about the makeup of the single population. “Many people fear the idea of singles,” she said. “They think they will be young hooligans.” Critics worry that micro-units will attract a young transient population that will not spend paychecks locally, and keep the neighbors up at night with rowdy behavior.

But the singles of New York City are not all hard-partying 20somethings. The population includes recent graduates drawn by a first job, slightly older people who have put off getting married and a growing population of older New Yorkers. The number of single New Yorkers age 65 and older has increased by almost 10 percent and has grown more rapidly than any other

group of singles in the city since 2000, according to William H. Frey, the senior demographer at the Brookings Institution, an independent research organization. Only 19 percent of single-person households are under 35 years old.

The population living in existing micro-apartments would suggest that they do not just appeal to the young.

Jack and Linda Sproule, both in their late 60s, have lived in a 300-square-foot apartment on Central Park West and 83rd Street for almost 13 years. “We were won over by gorgeous views of the park, and an elevator,” said Ms. Sproule, who as a self-described “old Upper West Sider,” is happy to have settled in the neighborhood.

The couple outfitted the apartment with a foldaway table and a Murphy bed from Resource Furniture, and they painted the floors white to make it look more airy. “Having a view really helps in a small space, too,” Ms. Sproule said.

Their grandchildren sleep over from time to time, curling up on a retractable chaise or on the floor. The secret to living together in their small home is mutual respect, Ms. Sproule said, joking that the only time she and her husband feel crowded is when their beloved 13-year-old rescue cat, Alphonse, lies on top of them while they sleep.

***Correction: February 20, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article described incorrectly the ceiling height of apartments at My Micro NY. They will be over nine feet high, not nine feet.*

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