
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Micro-apartments: more trouble than they're worth?

Original Reporting | By David Noriega | Housing, NYC, Quality of life

Nov. 20, 2013 — How much of an impact could the construction of “micro-apartments” have on New York City’s housing shortage, and how serious are the dangers associated with proceeding down the micro-apartment road? Our reporting suggests that the benefits are likely to be limited and the perils significant. Central to the dispute between proponents and skeptics are differing premises about the historical development of the housing shortage, the appropriate role of zoning, and the path that a less regulated market would take.

The pilot project

In August of 2012, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced with great enthusiasm a competition for the creation of a pilot building composed entirely of so-called micro-apartments. These miniature dwellings, to be packed into a building on East 27th Street in the Kips Bay section of Manhattan, would have to be marvels of design: the task was to create livable and desirable residential spaces using just 250 to 350 square feet per unit.

“We are simply letting the market work.”

— Mayor Michael Bloomberg

The competition was billed as an experiment in what could be gained if zoning regulations were relaxed: it obliged the City to waive the existing unit-size rule that would have been applicable to the project (a minimum of 400 square feet) as well as density rules that would have capped the maximum number of units in the building at a level substantially lower than what the City sought to create. The City was able to waive these zoning restrictions because the project would be built on public land.

At the heart of the project was a deep belief in the efficacy of market-based solutions. “These new units will allow us to create more affordable housing without any rent subsidy,” Bloomberg said at the press conference announcing the competition. “We are simply letting the market work.”

The winning vision was selected this past spring and is to be built by Monadnock Construction based on a design by the Brooklyn-based firm nARCHITECTS. Each unit is to be divided in two: a “toolbox” containing the bathroom, kitchen, and storage spaces; and a “canvas” for sleeping, eating, and everything else. How small are the smallest units? The canvas section, just 12 by 14 feet, is too small to fit a bed, table, and couch at the same time. Instead, the items are combined and hidden — most everything folds or tucks or spins to become something else. For example, for a Murphy bed stowed within a bookshelf to be moved into sleeping position, a dining table must be folded and hung on a wall.

Small is not always healthy

One reason that the relaxation of zoning standards raises alarm bells in some quarters is that very small apartments, densely packed together, come with potential risks to the health and well-being of the residents. “I wouldn’t say that it’s unhealthy for everyone,” said Dak Kopec, director of design for human health at Boston Architectural College. “But it is definitely unhealthy for some people.”

Kopec explained that the experiences of physical crowding (caused by confined space) and social crowding (caused by other people) could increase significantly in a building of micro-apartments. A resident is likely at times to feel trapped — forced to choose between a claustrophobic apartment on the one hand and social interaction in a heavily used common space on the other. “Crowding is a stressor,” Kopec said. “We all have the ability to cope with stressors in our lives, but we also have our thresholds” — the point at which stressors begin to interfere with our basic sense of stability.

The effects of crowding can include irritability, distraction, a reduction in problem-solving skills, and the like. In more severe cases, crowding, acting as an amplifier of stress, can trigger destructive behavior, whether it is focused inward or outward: Kopec cited research linking crowding-related stress to domestic violence, as well as to excessive drinking and other forms of self-medicating behavior.

Susan Saegert, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center who has studied housing from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes environmental psychology, said the negative consequences of living in a small space were directly linked to any given individual’s sense of freedom and choice in day-to-day existence. “The things people do when they’re trying to relieve stress often are to move around — to experience freedom,” Saegert said. “Small spaces obviously constrain that.”

What happens if a micro-apartment is shared by two people — a use supported by the Bloomberg administration? Little to no personal space and opportunity for privacy, dignity or retreat, characteristics often thought critical to the health of a relationship and the individuals in it. Saegert noted, for instance, the problem of “competing activity demands” — the inability to use the space simultaneously for separate activities that might conflict with each other, leading to a strong sense of loss of personal choice and agency.

Apartment as Swiss army knife

A Swiss army knife is quite a versatile gadget, and micro-apartments aspire to some of that versatility and cleverness. One example is the use of interchangeable furniture — Murphy beds and the like. But the additional daily maintenance required by such versatility has a downside. Dak Kopec of Boston Architectural College said the repetitive processes required to use such furniture can add to stress levels, and that the diligence with which people perform them is likely to degrade over time.

The effect is worsened by the fact that engaging in these processes does not feel like an option: it is necessary for the space to feel minimally livable. “We as humans don’t like to have a lot of processes,” Kopec said. “As time goes by, we stop engaging in some of those repetitive processes — putting the Murphy bed away or folding up the sofa or whatever — and all of a sudden our unit becomes more physically crowded.”

“I think over time it would be a relationship killer,” Saegert wrote in an email. The problem would be severely compounded if a household included children, whose school performance and development suffer significantly with crowding, according to Saegert. “If you’re talking children, this would be highly inappropriate and developmentally not good,” she said.

Eric Bunge, one of the architects who designed the New York micro-apartment pilot, was aware of quality-of-life issues raised by very small spaces. In fact, his firm took steps to mitigate those issues: higher (9-foot) ceilings and large, plentiful windows. Bunge suggested that minimum size and maximum density regulations should not be relaxed without other controls being put in place. “If these two zoning codes are relaxed, other ones need to be implemented to ensure qualities like light and air,” he said.

Who will and will not be helped?

In the Bloomberg Administration’s telling of the story, a varied and extensive population of New Yorkers would benefit from relaxed zoning and the construction it spurs. “Ultimately, the housing choices that [our program] seeks to create will serve a wide spectrum of small households and small family sizes,” then-Commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development Mathew M. Wambua said during the press conference announcing the competition. “Young professions, singles, couples, small families, artists, veterans, low- and moderate-income families, special needs populations — the list goes on and on.”

But Sarah Watson, deputy director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council (CHPC), a research and advocacy organization that played a key role in introducing the idea of micro-apartments to New York City, acknowledged that the pilot project in Kips Bay only addressed housing scarcity for a small, wealthy slice of the single-person market. “This is not in any way solving New York’s affordable housing issues,” she said. “You can’t solve these problems with just one project.” Instead, Watson said, the project helped fill a gap in the kinds of housing stock available to single people, especially those preoccupied with living in Manhattan.

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Watson did say, however, that, for single individuals, the micro-apartment concept could be applied broadly — across the city and across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Others are more skeptical. “Single-person households are by far the poorest households in New York City,” Moses Gates of the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD), an affordable housing research and advocacy group, told Remapping Debate. One of the main drivers behind the growing number of singles in New York, Gates said, is the fact that the city is aging — and elderly singles tend to have extremely low incomes. “If you’re trying to house the growing single population of New York,” Gates said, “you also have to reflect who that growing single population is, which is poor and elderly.”

One group that seems clearly not to benefit from a push for micro-apartments is families with children. (No one is yet arguing that micro-apartments would work for such families.) In fact, Watson of CHPC said that a change in zoning laws to encourage small studios might supplant, rather than supplement, construction of larger units appropriate for families with children. Some amount of this replacement, she said, is needed to accommodate a growing population of single-person households.

Yet citywide statistics remind us that the scarcity of affordable housing in New York remains a crisis for families. The New York City Housing Authority's waiting list for public housing illustrates the problem. While the need for housing for single individuals is substantial, with some 100,000 one-person households on the NYCHA waiting list, the demand for apartments from households of two or more is even larger: 144,000 such two-or-more households, comprising nearly 424,000 people, are waiting for apartments, according to NYCHA's latest numbers. The list does not count a large number of families who can barely afford their homes but who do not qualify for public housing.

"The problem of affordability impacts a much wider population than just singles," said Joan Byron, director of policy for the Pratt Center for Community Development. "Single-parent families with one or two or three kids have trouble affording housing. Conventional families with two parents have trouble affording housing." And so on.

Zoning failure or market failure?

A key to understanding the difference between those optimistic and those pessimistic about the potential of micro-apartments is that the former tend to believe that the market, left more to its own devices, would serve the interests of a wide range of New Yorkers. In this view, the principal reason that more single individuals are now living in informal sharing arrangements (often with several roommates) than used to be the case is that the market was not allowed to respond to a mismatch between demographics and housing supply: while the number of single individuals needing apartments increased, zoning regulations artificially restricted the number of studios and one-bedrooms that could be profitably built.

An area of agreement?

Watson said there were other ways to reform zoning codes to encourage the construction of studio and one-bedroom apartments without forgoing the minimum unit size requirement. For instance, she pointed out that new construction outside the Manhattan core mandates a certain number of parking spaces per unit, thus discouraging putting more units in a building. This requirement is itself a relic of a mid-20th-century prioritization of automobiles, part of the same historical context that Watson and CHPC criticize as outdated. "There are lots of different, indirect things that come together to stop a studio [apartment] from being encouraged," Watson said. "So, if you wanted to, you could keep the minimum unit size, but you could have more flexibility on, say, density controls or parking requirements."

As it happens, Housing First!, an affordable housing advocacy group that does not take a specific position on micro-units, also recently proposed eliminating or reducing parking requirements for affordable housing development.

But micro-apartment skeptics say that increased sharing stemmed less from an overall lack of small apartments than from their rising cost: the small apartments that an already increasingly unregulated market did create demanded rents well beyond what most New Yorkers could afford. Increased sharing “has everything to do with the affordability of the housing stock, not the size and shape of it,” Byron said. This is reflected, she added, in the fact that the proportion of New Yorkers across the spectrum of household sizes that is “rent-burdened” (paying at least 30 percent of household income in rent) or “severely rent-burdened” (paying more than 50 percent) has grown rapidly and continues to do so.

More generally, critics of the Bloomberg Administration’s housing policies contend that a market-oriented approach chooses to ignore what profit-driven markets actually do. “If you don’t have any government subsidy or any government leverage,” ANHD’s Gates said, “the private market, no matter what neighborhood, does not build for anybody except the top of the market.” When developers have their druthers, Gates said, they do not build low- or middle-income housing. “Developers build to make the most profit.”

If proponents are correct that building 250-square-foot apartments at a greater density than is currently allowed would be more profitable for developers, then CUNY’s Saegert points to another market consequence. If property is seen to be able to yield more profit per square foot in the micro-apartment model, then the price of developable property will rise to reflect that potential use. Once it does, less profitable uses (the 400-square-foot studio, or small one-bedroom apartment) would become less economically feasible to build.

For these reasons, critics dispute the notion put forth by the Bloomberg administration and micro-apartment proponents that relaxing regulations is a matter of adding “choice” to the types of apartments available to New Yorkers. Should the size and density requirements be broadly relaxed, landlords could decide to substitute very small units for “regular sized” studios and one-bedrooms. In that scenario, the only choice for many people would then not be between renting a micro-apartment and renting a larger apartment, but between renting a micro-apartment and not renting anything at all. Given continuing demand-side pressures, a micro-apartment, could, Saegert said, come to cost the same as a one-bedroom used to cost in the same neighborhood. “Once it becomes a standard,” asked Saegert, “will it become the thing you have to settle for?”

Settling for less

Proponents of micro-apartments, many of whom argue that current zoning laws were overly influenced by an idealization of the nuclear family of the 1950s, suggest that it is not practical to expect a solution to the housing crisis without relaxation of housing standards.

But such a relaxation would represent a significant break from the historical trajectory of New York City’s building laws. At the turn of the 20th century, the Tenement House Act mandated minimum room sizes, air and light requirements, functional plumbing, and so forth — not just for new construction but also for all existing tenements.

From then on, said Richard Plunz, director of the Urban Design Lab at Columbia University and author of “A History of Housing in New York City,” housing standards continued to improve. “These laws have been adjusted many times over the years,” Plunz said, “but never downward.” (Plunz was a member of the panel of experts put together by the Bloomberg administration to select the winner for the micro-apartments pilot. He helped choose the design in spite of his wariness at the premise of loosening zoning restrictions.)

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The two specific zoning regulations waived for the micro-apartments pilot originated with the Quality Housing Program, a 1987 overhaul of New York’s previous zoning code, which had existed since 1961. These amendments established the 400-square-foot minimum size for apartments, although only for certain districts, and strengthened the density regulations established in the previous zoning code by more directly limiting the number of units that could go in any given building.

As with housing reforms before them, these amendments were driven by a complicated set of goals and interests. They aimed to increase development but also to maintain the character of certain neighborhoods — so-called contextual districts — by allowing for lower, bulkier buildings, as opposed to the towers promoted by the 1961 zoning code.

However, both the 1961 zoning code and the 1987 amendments also expressly stated their goals as improving the living conditions of New Yorkers — a goal that was sometimes explicitly tied back to the tenement reforms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Explaining the 1987 amendments to *The New York Times* in a contemporaneous letter to the editor, an official at the Department of City Planning named Sandy Hornick wrote: “If production were the only goal, the non-fireproof, walk-up tenement, with rooms without windows and bathrooms in the hall, would be an appropriate model. Our objective has always been to balance production and quality.”

To Andrew S. Dolkart, an architecture historian and director of the historic preservation program at Columbia University, relaxing minimum size standards would signify a step backwards. “We seem to be regressing,” Dolkart said. “We seem to be arguing that now people deserve less than they did in the past.”

Bunge, of nARCHITECTS, argued that a turn toward micro-apartments is, in fact, progressive: it is part of a push for more sustainable cities that use fewer resources. “The context for us,” he said, “is to maintain viable, sustainable cities, to combat sprawl, and to relax the burden on our transportation infrastructure.”

But one of the things that the incoming de Blasio Administration will need to consider is the wisdom of squeezing the size of already small apartments in the densest part of the city, especially when there are alternatives such as moderately up-zoning low-density areas and discouraging what *The Wall Street Journal* recently described as [the trend toward “colossal condos” that are New York City’s “answer to the suburban McMansion.”](#)

To those doubtful of the micro-apartments approach, the idea that studios — not exactly palaces to begin with — should become smaller in order to adapt to a market signal is difficult to swallow. It requires a willingness to do away with standards that, like the early tenement laws, go on to determine people's living conditions for decades or centuries. Rather than asking what these standards should be and how best to achieve and preserve them, the micro-apartments approach asks how we can best adjust our standards to the behaviors of the market.

Dolkart said a similar debate surrounded the tenement laws at the turn of the 19th century, with the central argument against the reforms being that an unrestrained market would resolve the housing problems of the slums. By choosing standards over markets, New York laid the ground for continued reform and improvement.

“Standards can change,” Dolkart said. “But one hopes – at least I hope – that standards get better.”

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