

Perfecting the micro-unit

BY MARY ANN AZEVEDO

There are building and design challenges that come with smaller apartment units, so the building process is an evolving one.

Dan Wu, executive director of Charities Housing, said he has learned something from prior experiences building micro-unit communities over the years.

“For example, our first one we didn’t have a full kitchen but realized that people really do like having the option of cooking,” he said. “In another, the kitchen and living/sleeping area flowed together, but we learned that people like some separation.”

John Sheehan, principal of San Diego-based Studio E Architects, said his work in designing Archer Studios marked his first micro-unit project.

In preparation, he did his homework. “I looked at all different kinds of small living quarters including cruise ship cabins and small studios in Europe to see how they were efficient and maximized the living area of the unit,” Sheehan said.

Another challenge was storage. “We worked hard to find nooks and crannies to add storage and built-in shelving,” he said.

To help tenants feel more comfortable, the team concentrated on creating common amenities, such as a TV lounge and kitchen, as well as an open feel with light colors.

“That’s part of the hook,” Sheehan said. “They could say, ‘I’m willing to live in this many square feet, but I have access to all this other space that’s sort of mine as well.’”

What you can fit inside 300 square feet



The upside of downsizing

More developers are eyeing smaller formats for multi-housing developments

BY MARY ANN AZEVEDO

Sky-high rents have some home developers thinking small.

Small as in micro-unit apartments.

Micro-units are typically smaller than a studio or one-bedroom — think about 300 square feet or less. Traditionally the realm of affordable housing projects, San Jose city officials are now encouraging them for market-rate apartment developments, or the for-lease units that do not have income restrictions.

For tenants, it means more affordable options. For developers, it means more units — and more rent — for one location.

The trend has already grown in popularity elsewhere, and might soon be coming to San Jose. Joe Horwedel, the city’s planning director, said that he recently met with Berkeley-based Todd Jersey Architecture, which is considering designing micro-units (about 300 square feet) with a kitchen and bathroom on a property owned by Barry Swenson Builder on South First Street, just north of San Fernando Avenue, in downtown San Jose.

Not only would the units be small, they’d likely be built modularly, or pre-built.

The city is “very interested” in the concept, Horwedel said, noting that the architect firm was proposing to not build any parking for cars and rather lease space from a garage in the area. There would, however, be a bike garage available.

“It was a pretty creative kind of package,” he said. “And we would be happy to approve it.”

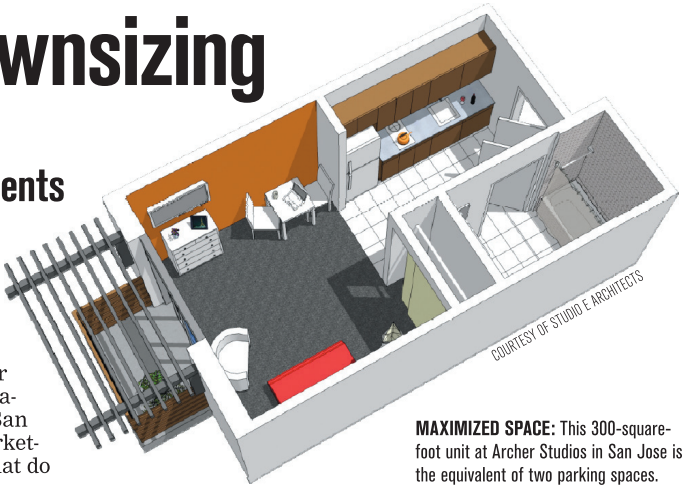
More demand in affordable housing

Micro-units, already used in affordable housing projects, are also seeing more interest in that market.

Earlier this year, Charities Housing completed a 42-unit affordable housing community in San Jose called Archer Studios where the apartments are 300 square feet, or the equivalent of two parking stalls. The micro-units leased quickly, and the developer had to ultimately close the waiting list due to the strong demand.

In Palo Alto, the Palo Alto Housing Corp. completed another affordable housing project called Tree House Apartments, consisting of mainly studios between 300 and 450 square feet. Those, too, leased quickly with a long waiting list.

Both projects saw increased demand from couples and



MAXIMIZED SPACE: This 300-square-foot unit at Archer Studios in San Jose is the equivalent of two parking spaces.

families, the developers note, in a trend that could be a sign of the times.

Jacky Morales-Ferrand, assistant director of housing for the city of San Jose, said there appears to be a national movement for smaller housing that has not yet found its way to Silicon Valley.

“It’s been a very successful model for our affordable housing program, and we think it could be an effective tool to bring in more housing for more individuals that can’t afford the market,” she said.

She points to Seattle developer Calhoun Properties, which made headlines in 2009 when it opened Videré on Capitol Hill, a complex the Seattle Times describes as featuring “46 furnished, cable-ready rooms the size of parking spaces — some as small as 90 square feet.” The units were called “aPod-ments” and leased for \$500 to \$600 a month, including utilities, Internet and access to shared kitchens.

The complex was a hit, and the developer has since built more in the city.

As for other parts of the Bay Area, a San Francisco company called Zeta Communities and Patrick Kennedy of Panoramic Interests are working now on a project called SmartSpace — 23 micro-units for downtown San Francisco.

Morales-Ferrand said such units would make sense in San Jose considering the increasing rents on new apartment developments these days.

“We’re seeing one-bedrooms or studios that cost in the \$2,000 range,” she said. “Those who can’t afford that but don’t qualify for affordable product and don’t want to live with roommates or in overcrowded situations need other alternatives.”

MARY ANN AZEVEDO is a freelance reporter.



BIG DEMAND: Smaller housing units, or ‘micro-units,’ are growing in popularity, according to local developers. The 42-unit Archer Studios project in San Jose had such strong interest when it opened earlier this year that the developer had to ultimately close the waiting list.