



February 2014

Bigger Isn't Always Better for Renters: Micro-Apartments and Single-Room Occupancy Units

By Anne Saylor, Community Development Administrator

People often mention the lack of affordable rental housing in our community. Parents talk about their young adult children moving back home because one-bedroom rents are too high. Advocates talk about the lack of affordable housing for very low income and homeless persons. This problem is not unique to Dutchess County. It is a fact of life in many communities, particularly those in or near large urban areas. People cite many causes including stagnating wages and high rents, but no one points to the fact that today's housing, even rentals, has gotten pretty big and our expectations for both size and amenities may have become unrealistic: three bedroom apartments must have 2.5 bathrooms, one-bedroom apartments must have dishwashers, and every unit must have granite counters and stainless steel appliances.

The Demise of SRO Housing

To a great extent, the increase in our housing quality over the past century has been a good thing. Improvements in building standards and materials means we are far less likely to die in a house fire, and the sanitary conditions we live in are greatly improved. But somewhere in this drive for better and safer housing we made a decision, conscious or not, that smaller housing was undesirable. The main victim of this decision was the single room occupancy (SRO) unit. For much of our history SRO housing was the place where single, working class individuals lived before starting a family or when they moved to a new town. A former colleague lived in a local boarding house when he first started working for the Planning Department after graduating college. The most famous boarding house was probably the Barbizon Hotel in NYC where young women, such as Grace Kelly, Lauren Bacall and Cybill Shepherd, lived before they made it big as actresses.

A variety of societal changes, including an improved standard of living for working class families and the deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness in the 1960s and 1970s, caused the populations in SRO units to shift and the buildings to deteriorate. Instead of developing and enforcing standards to insure the quality and management of SRO units, many communities took the easier step of closing and outlawing such housing.

What's In a Name?

SROs came in many sizes, from an owner-occupied building with just a few rooms, to much larger facilities. Different terms refer to these different sizes, as follows:

- Small scale = Boarding house or Rooming house
- Large scale = Residential hotel

While this may have removed “problem” properties in particular neighborhoods, it caused a larger problem in our communities. It removed an entire housing type that had provided a much needed choice in our communities for generations, with very little thought about what would replace it and where the people who lived in it would end up.

In recent years there has been a movement to resurrect SRO housing. Many have realized that excluding this housing type from our communities may have contributed to overcrowding and homelessness. Under the newer model, the rooms often have small bathrooms and a kitchenette while providing a shared full kitchen and some living space. We have learned that the most important component of successful SRO housing is quality management that screens tenants effectively, and monitors and enforces building rules. Under this model, even lower-income households and chronically homeless persons can be successfully housed at no detriment to the surrounding neighborhoods. The oldest and most successful models are run by [Common Ground](#), which provides supportive and affordable housing throughout New York City for veterans, low-income working adults, young people aging out of foster care, and the chronically homeless, among others.



This 16-unit SRO building is one of the few still in existence in the City of Poughkeepsie. As shown here, the building is well maintained and blends into the neighborhood.

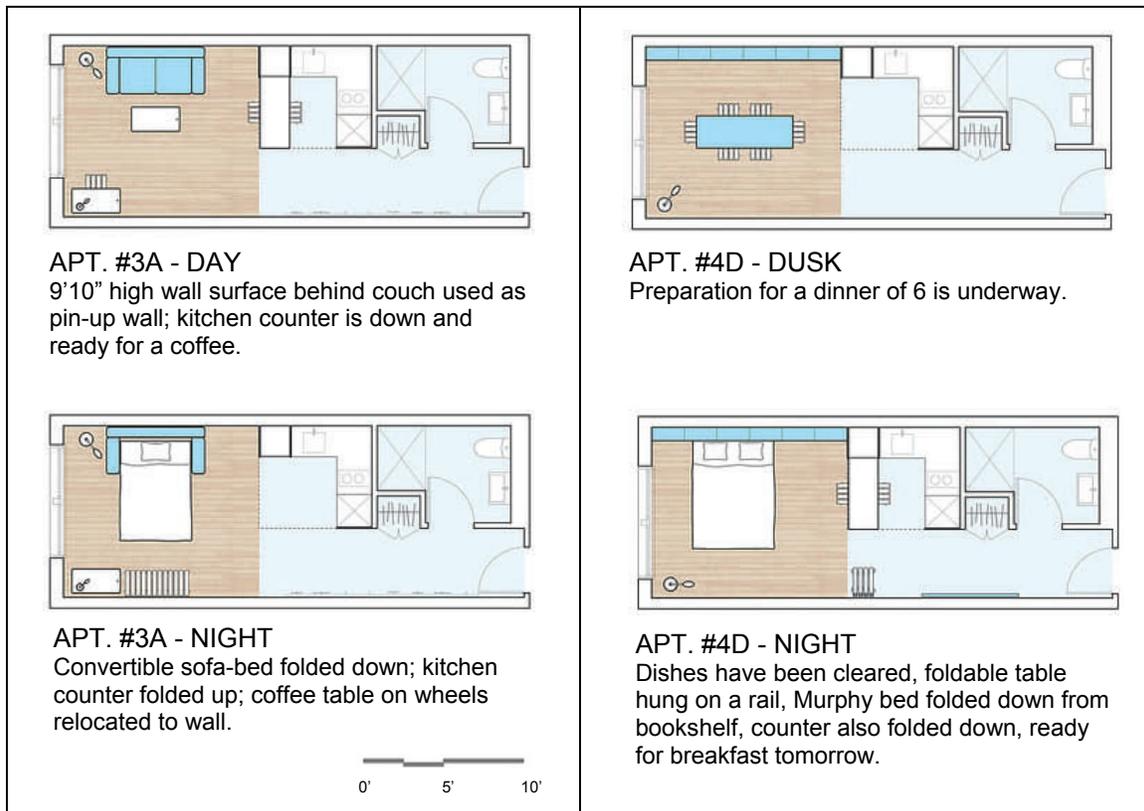


This formerly run-down, vacant foreclosure was renovated by Hudson River Housing into a 4-unit SRO that will be home to female veterans at risk of homelessness.

Micro-Apartments: The Next Generation of SRO

In recent years, housing developers have coined a new term: micro-apartments. Typically 200-300 square feet, these apartments are much smaller than the minimum requirements in most of today’s zoning ordinances. Unlike SROs, which often share kitchens and baths, micro-apartments generally contain their own kitchen and bathroom, although there may be some shared common space. Some people say this is just a new name for SRO, but whatever you call it there seems to be interest from both the development community and the public in smaller units similar to the SROs we did away with in the past few decades.

While units this size may seem too small to many people, changes in the way we live mean smaller units are increasingly practical for many. Eating out is a way of life for many people, so they don't need a large kitchen. Technological advances mean your huge TV hangs on the wall (bye-bye bulky cabinets), and an enormous book and music collection can reside on a tablet that's smaller than a hardcover book. Improved building materials mean we can have full-extension shelves to make better use of our cabinet space (no more dead space at the back). Even the old "Murphy bed" can now be put away with the push of a button and hidden behind your flat screen TV. It may not be for everyone, but there are people who would like this simpler space or for whom this is the best option, and our zoning should permit these choices.



Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg held a design competition to develop innovative yet affordable micro-apartment housing in NYC. The winning proposal, dubbed "My Micro NY" involves modest, flexible floorplans with an expansive feel. These two examples show how the units can be rearranged depending on specific day-to-day needs.

Images sourced from inhabitat.com's article entitled [nARCHITECTS' adAPT NYC Micro Apartments Feature Convertible Furniture and Multi-Use Rooms](#) by Lori Zimmer, February 1, 2013.

Zoning for SROs and Micro-Apartments

In some ways, the zoning for SROs and micro-apartments is fairly easy. We just need to adjust our minimum size standards. Ordinances should define whether bathrooms and kitchens are in the units, and what type of common space and amenities must be provided. Parking standards should also be reduced or eliminated depending on the type of housing, location and type of tenant. An SRO targeted towards the homeless may need no parking, while a development that is near transit and targeted to young professionals may need 0.5 spaces per unit. There can also be a requirement that a percentage of micro-apartments be perpetually affordable to lower-income residents.

For buildings with shared facilities or amenities, the most important aspect is the management plan. Poor management is one reason SROs failed, so we need to structure new SROs to avoid this problem. Management plans should be submitted as part of the planning process. It should be recorded against the property and be a condition of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO). An on-site resident manager may be required for buildings over a certain size. This management plan should describe management policies and operations, rental procedures, maintenance plans, residency and guest rules, security procedures and staffing needs. Management plans should be updated and reviewed on a regular basis as a condition of the CO, either by the municipality or a qualified third party.

With good design and effective management we can successfully integrate both SRO housing and micro-apartments into our communities, providing safe and appropriate housing options for young adults, the elderly, and our lower-income neighbors.

More Information

[A Micro Solution for a Macro Problem](#), [Source: [Next City](#)]

[Bring Back Flophouses, Rooming Houses, and Microapartments](#)
[Source: www.slate.com]

[nARCHITECTs' adAPT NYC Micro-Apartments Feature Convertible Furniture and Multi-Use Rooms](#) [Source: inhabitat.com]

[SmartSpace slideshow](#) of micro-apartment features

[SRO Housing Corporation](#), a non-profit organization in Los Angeles

[Common Ground](#)

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