Rooming House Redux

There's a market for small, simple housing for young singles.

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An odd popular myth has been circulating in recent years, fueled perhaps by media stories of college graduates immediately landing $80,000 a year jobs at Microsoft, Google, or some prestigious law or investment firm. The notion is that young people are easily launching careers—and acquiring the usual goodies—right out of school. Maybe this idea is left over from the heady boom era of five or six years ago, but the reality is certainly different today. Most people in their 20s are struggling financially. If they are employed at all, it's often with two, or even three, part-time jobs, few of them offering benefits.

According to the U.S. Census, the median income of people ages 24 to 29 is barely $31,000—before taxes. This translates to being able to pay, at most, a monthly rent of $850, which is virtually impossible to find in most larger American cities where jobs are located. Plus, many recent (and not so re-
What's old is new again: A recently built Seattle apartment building, the Videre (left), is classified as a rooming house under the city code, allowing the builder to offer minimal parking and small units at affordable rents. Above: The exterior of Triple Bottom Lofts, a prototype development by LMN Architects of Seattle. See the complete diagram online at www.planning.org/planning/index.htm.

cent) college grads are still paying off their educations, which adds to their monthly costs significantly.

Many young people are forced to remain at—or return to—their parents’ home, living in a room whose walls are plastered with high school pennants and pictures of rock stars and whose shelves are lined with teddy bears. Or they are packed into houses with four or five roommates, some of whom occasionally can’t contribute to the rent, “borrow” food, or let their pets run amok.

Lots of these folks fall into Richard Florida's “creative class.” They might be musicians, artists, actors, graphic designers, web designers, or clothing makers, to name a few—many of them supplementing their dream jobs with day jobs that help pay the bills. (The New York Times highlighted this phenomenon in June in a feature article, “Juggling Jobs.”) However precariously em-
employed and housed they may be, these young people do contribute to the vitality and cultural wealth of a community.

For those of us used to holding down only a few long-term jobs in our lifetime, this new economy is baffling. But it is even more baffling to the people living it, those young people entering the workforce for the first time.

What we are seeing is a sociological tri-recta of sorts. Millennials (aka Generation Y), people born between the early 1980s and 2000, make up a quarter of the U.S. population: 78 million people. Their incomes are modest. They are delaying marriage—by a full five years over the previous decade, according to the Census Bureau—and childbearing. And, significantly, this group has largely rejected suburbia—the places where they most likely grew up. They seek instead cities or older, close-in suburbs that have a richer array of choices in employment, transportation (namely, strong transit and biking infrastructure), arts and entertainment, and a “cafe culture” similar to what’s found in many European cities.

Members of older generations often dismiss this behavior as temporary; young people’s values will change once they decide to have children. We think the trends are pointing in the opposite direction. The suburbs may not be exactly dead, as Christopher Leinberger has asserted, but they have most certainly lost their allure for a lot of young people.

**Built-in barriers**

One huge problem is simply the scarcity of good, safe housing that is reasonably affordable to singles and young couples with moderate incomes.

Zoning ordinances make it virtually impossible to build new inexpensive housing. The chief culprit is codes that require one or two parking stalls per dwelling unit. As Donald Shoup, FAICP, author of The High Cost of Free Parking (the second edition of which is now available in paperback from APAPlanningBooks.com), has so eloquently pointed out, what appears to be free does indeed come at a price—in this case, higher rents.

Our codes assume that everyone owns a car, but many urban young people have no car at all; they walk, bicycle, or take transit. Recent reports have shown a dramatic decline in car ownership and in the desire to own a car among teenagers—a huge break with trends of the past 50 years. Thirty-five years ago, three-quarters of 17-year-olds in the U.S. had their driver’s licenses, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. By 2008, the most recent year data was available, less than half had licenses. Further, according to Advertising Age, over the past 15 years, there has been a 7.7 percent decline in the share of miles driven by people between 21 and 30.

Beyond that, many communities establish density requirements based on outdated, middle-class measures of the good life. A common rule of thumb is to assume an average of 1,000 square feet per multifamily dwelling unit: two bedrooms, two baths, a living room, kitchen, and dining room. But just as has been the case in European cities for some time, Americans can—and do—live perfectly well in a fraction of that floor space.

In Amsterdam, for example, many urban dwellers live well in several hundred square feet of space, at densities that are 50, 70, or even 100 units to the acre.

**New housing for a new economy**

We are obviously in a different era today, but that doesn’t mean that old assumptions are gone. Those who have already achieved their life’s dream—say, a single-family detached house—look at smaller living places and wonder, “Who would want to live there?” The myth persists that the U.S. is composed mostly of traditional nuclear families with two parents and two-and-a-half children each. Despite the unmistakable demographic trend towards more one- and two-person households, many decision makers seem to be rooted in a faded picture of this country.

Now it’s time to clean out and clean up our land-use regulations to open the way to alternative forms of housing. A good first step would be to disaggregate housing from parking. Right now, people without cars are subsidizing those who have them, through higher rents. Is that socially just or appropriate as a public policy objective?

Further, we need to get rid of arbitrary density limits based on dwelling units per acre formulas. Form-based codes have already embraced other approaches. Why not simply replace dwelling units per acre—an approach that is actually an inducement to build large units—with floor area ratio?

Jim Potter, a developer in Seattle, has built several new buildings specifically for people in their 20s. As he points out, their lifestyle is radically different from that of other households: They spend time at coffee bars, in clubs, in parks and plazas, and at jobs (often long hours). They are basically looking for a safe place to sleep that has a private bath and is located reasonably close to all the other places they go.

Potter, who is the chairman of Kauri Investments, is smart enough to know that if he were to propose an entirely new form of development, he would spend years in debates and public hearings filled with angry home owners decrying the likely “transients, criminals, and social miscreants” that would live there, as one person did at a recent hearing I attended where mother-in-law units were being considered. Instead, Potter revived a section of city codes that have not been looked at in decades: rooming houses.

Just saying the name evokes Hollywood movie set pieces: old, multistory houses ruled over by a kindly (or cantankerous) older woman, replete with lace doilies on the furniture, tiny rooms with cast iron beds, and a bath down the hall. Well, this is not your grandmother’s rooming house.

As Potter notes, the thing that makes a rooming house different is that it may have a shared kitchen. However, in Seattle the code doesn’t prohibit in-unit kitchens. So he provides a small kitchen in each apartment,
A floor plan and section of a typical unit for the Triple Bottom Loft housing type. This studio space could have up to 480 square feet and include a kitchen, bathroom, living area, and sleeping loft.

along with a private, albeit very compact, bath. The total size is a few hundred square feet. In one building, the Videre, units range from 90 to 168 square feet.

Under the terms of a rooming house, the amount of parking required is minimal, and he charges renters separately for the use of a stall. (Interestingly, he notes that most stalls go untaken.) He furnishes each unit, and includes all utilities—Wi-Fi, too—in the rent, which is only about $500 per month. (The average rent for a one-bedroom in Seattle is more than double that.) It’s not surprising that Potter has waiting lists for his next three projects.

Potter knows that good management of rental properties is a key to their success and reputation in the marketplace. He doesn’t just build to flip, he builds to operate. So his staff makes sure that prospective tenants are carefully screened and public areas are immaculately maintained.

Palo Alto’s Tree House
For decades, the Bay Area architecture firm Pyatok Architects has been known for designing below-market housing that is both dignified and delightful. One of its recent projects is the Tree House in Palo Alto, which is intended for young singles. This 35-unit building is located on a lot that measures less than a quarter of an acre, and its four stories have been stepped and terraced to avoid the boxy mass so often associated with densities of this magnitude.

Parking is kept to a bare minimum and the apartments are spare—just 350 to 400 square feet. The rents range from less than $400 to $900 a month, compared to about $1,500 to $2,000 for market-rate studios elsewhere in Palo Alto. Palo Alto’s Housing Corporation developed and manages the building, and rents are based on income. The housing group also provides free transit passes to residents, so they need not have a car.

“The Tree House is specifically aimed at helping younger people establish themselves in the workplace with a decent place to live on their own,” says Pyatok project architect Adrianne Steichen. “Moreover, the building was carefully designed to fit the scale of the surrounding community,” where most buildings are two to four stories tall.

Triple Bottom Lofts
In our model, which is still an unbuilt prototype, we have borrowed the name from popular sustainability shorthand: The Triple Bottom Lofts. The approach recognizes the interdependence of the market and building economics, environmentally effective standards, and sociability and social justice. It’s a prototype that does not attempt to achieve an ideal, but rather reflects typical construction methods and practices—making it affordable, transferable, and adaptable.

It is basically frame construction sitting on top of a ground floor that is separated from the floor above by a fire-resistant slab and columns. The building could include an elevator, but it could be built with stairs instead, as are Potter’s buildings. Handicapped accessible units are located on the ground floor.

The units—all studios—are small, ranging from 400 to 500 square feet to meet the needs of young singles or couples just starting out. They have high ceilings, allowing a low-head-height sleeping loft above the kitchen area and bath. Although there are 36 apartment lofts, only 18 parking stalls are provided. Instead, a secure bicycle storage and repair room is included. Rents would be in the range of $650 to $800 a month, depending on location.

Each dwelling contains a small, compact kitchen, but there is also a shared kitchen in a corner “great room” for parties, receptions, dinners, and social get-togethers. Essentially, this common space is an in-house coffee bar with tables and chairs, so people can socialize and even work on their laptops there, too.

The ground floor could be occupied by small shops and cafes, but they also could be leased to small start-up businesses—sort of a street-side commercial incubator. The leasable spaces are intentionally modest—1,000 square feet at most—to nurture home-grown businesses and discourage national chains.

Special features include a green roof planted with sedums and grasses that cover part of the building. The roof collects and absorbs precipitation, provides insulation, and creates urban habitat. Downspouts from the roof direct rainfall to curbside rain gardens, and a rooftop pea patch allows residents to grow their own food.

In a nod to a recently constructed building in Portland, Oregon, that already does this, a chicken coop is also perched on the roof, as are rooftop terraces for residents’ use. Our model also features a wind turbine that could generate some of the power for the building. (In climates with ample sun, this could be replaced with photovoltaic solar panels.)

We envision this type of housing being immediately applicable to urban areas served by subway, light rail, or streetcars, and as particularly ripe for communities building high-capacity bus rapid transit. But we also believe the Triple Bottom Lofts model could fit well in many smaller towns and suburban communities with underused or vacant properties—former car dealers, fast-food businesses, or strip malls. In almost every community, there are numerous sites of less than 15,000 square feet, including oversized parking lots associated with malls, supermarkets, and big box stores, where this would work.

This is a prototype, but many variations are possible, some with fewer environmental bells and whistles than we have included. But we are convinced there is a huge, pent-up—and growing—demand for housing of this type in hundreds of cities and towns throughout America.