OPEN UP, BOSTON

Let developers think small, creating new housing for all

FOR CASH-STRAPPED urbanites who see all of Boston as their playground, a tiny apartment in a convenient location is far preferable to a large one that's farther from work, friends, and things to do. In that spirit, a group of young designers recently built a prototype micro-unit that squeezes the essentials of Boston living into an economical 300 square feet. The footprint is big enough to accommodate a normal-sized bed; a compact, all-in-one kitchenette; and even a designated storage space for a bike — something for which designers' research showed strong demand.

The prototype, alas, is in storage, when it could be a model for thousands of smaller apartments in key locations around town. For there are two main ways to make sure people up and down the income spectrum can afford to live in Boston. One is to build up an inventory of rent-subsidized apartments, as the city has taken great pains to do. The other is to think small — to let developers build apartments compact enough that even people of modest means can afford them at market rates.

Mayor Menino's administration has put a toe in the water, by authorizing 190 of what it calls "innovation units" in the Seaport District, the smallest of which are about 350 square feet. They are to be located in buildings with the kind of common work and living spaces that promote chance meetings among creative people. Bending the usual minimum-size rules to allow these units was a bold step to attract young, work-addicted techies and entrepreneurs to an area that's emerging as one of the city's priciest. Yet the rents on these units, perhaps as much as $1,500 a month, will still be too high for most recent grads.

Worse still, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the city's main planning agency, is strangely reluctant to permit more of these smaller units elsewhere in the city; chief planner Kairos Shen surprised the audience at a recent Suffolk University forum on micro-units by saying the city won't allow them outside the Innovation District anytime soon. In an interview, he warns against letting the development of micro-unit projects outstrip the city's ability to regulate them. His agency's stance reflects some ancient fears: that warrens of tiny rooms may turn into flophouses, that little apartments are inherently exploitative.

Yet this attitude fails to recognize just how attractive living in Boston's urban core has become. Worse yet, the city is refusing to let the natural workings of the housing market relieve the pressure not just on recent graduates, but on a broad variety of lower-income Bostonians.

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For many Boston-area residents, traditional affordable-housing programs are of little practical use. Consider the case of Quinton Kerns. He's a 28-year-old designer at the firm ADD Inc. who worked on the micro-unit prototype, but his own circumstances show the rationale for such units. His job is in the Seaport District. He doesn't have a car. He earns somewhat below the median income. He also has, as he puts it, "tons of student debt."

Before a recent move, Kerns called more than 30 companies that manage rent-restricted apartments, and found that some units had wait lists of three or four years. The one ostensibly affordable unit with a vacancy still had a monthly rent of $1,060. Instead, he took a room in a house with five strangers in Somerville for $630 a month.

This dilemma is too easily dismissed as a ritual of 20-something life in Greater Boston, a problem seemingly less pressing than the travails of working families and the elderly. Yet the difficulty that recent graduates face in establishing themselves here worries employers, such as Vertex Pharmaceuticals, that depend on an influx of new talent — and raises the pressure on working families, too. When grad students or young professionals room together instead of living on their own, they can outbid many families for units in brownstones or triple-deckers. Boston's failure to allow the construction of smaller housing units only aggravates the problem that traditional affordable-housing programs are trying desperately to solve.

Virtually everyone who lives in Boston has decided to skimp on space to some degree. Yet city rules limit just how big of a sacrifice tenants can make; by one rule of thumb, new one-bedroom apartments must be 750 square feet or more to gain zoning approval, and studios must be 500 square feet. The city eased up in 2006 by creating a new category of "metro" units, which allow for one-bedrooms as small as 625 square feet, and studios as small as 450 square feet, in dense areas north of the Mass. Pike or along major transit lines.

But even that laxer standard can mean rents well north of $2,000 a month for a small apartment. The obvious way to bring that cost down — without rent subsidies or elaborate regulatory interventions — is to relax the prohibition on smaller units, and to encourage their construction all across the city. Building thousands of micro-units in transit-friendly locations, such as the Forest Hills T station and the Longwood Medical Area, would provide market-rate housing within the reach of people just getting their start in Boston. And neighborhoods would benefit as new residents bring their business to local stores and eateries.

Regulating low-cost market-rate housing out of existence, or refusing to let it be built in the first place, doesn't eliminate the demand for it. Students and others seek cheaper under-the-table living quarters: unlicensed rooming houses, illegally divided units. The consequences can be tragic, as when 22-year-old Boston University student Binland Lee died in April in a fire in an overcrowded rooming house in Allston.

That tragedy prompted calls, quite reasonably, for stepped-up safety inspections. Yet Bostonians — and especially candidates in the upcoming mayoral race — should also reconsider development policies that yield luxury housing and subsidized housing, but nothing in between.

Letting developers build smaller, cheaper market-rate apartments runs up against half a century of assumptions about housing policy. An earlier generation of community activists in a tumultuous era in Boston saw housing matters in stark moral terms: Proposals for new apartment and condo buildings were intrusions into the fragile fabric of a historic city; rising rents were proof of landlords' indifference to tenants' plight. Today, rent control is history, and it's clearer that Boston's stiff housing costs primarily reflect the mismatch between the limited supply of housing and growing demand for it. Yet an instinctive suspicion of the motives of for-profit builders and landlords still colors the development debate.

Indeed, Shen cites the fact that rents per square foot are significantly higher for smaller units than for large ones as a reason to proceed carefully on building micro-units; there's a palpable concern at the agency that developers will exploit the price differential to build too many small units.

Actually, it's an opportunity — a sign that the private market can provide more of a kind of housing that's sorely needed. The city should let it do so.