

The cost of housing in major global cities such as Hong Kong, New York and London has given birth to a new trend: micro-living. Micro-apartments are designed to cater for a generation of young urban inhabitants who aren't poor enough to benefit from social housing but can't afford to buy or rent in the city where they live.

The genesis of this movement is in Asia, where living room in big cities has always been squeezed and apartment sizes have traditionally been small compared to Europe. Developers have responded to the property boom in Hong Kong by creating ever-smaller flats. Li Ka-shing, reckoned to be the richest person in Asia, is behind a development called Mont Vert, which includes units ranging from just 165sq ft to 196sq ft.

And a number of US cities are interested in micro-apartments as a way to alleviate urban housing shortages. New York has recently waived rules stating that all apartments must be at least 400sq ft in size for the pilot My Micro Apartment project. This nine-storey block by nArchitects offers 55 rental studios, from 270sq ft to 370sq ft in size. If it works, it is likely to be replicated across Manhattan. As with many such schemes, while the apartments are small, other facilities are offered by way of compensation, in this case a roof terrace and gym.

In London, a recent study by Knight Frank found that 45 per cent of 18-to-24-year-olds and 37 per cent of 35-to-44-year-olds would consider living in a studio flat of around 300sq ft if it were in a central location.

Developer Pocket Living is one of the first to step into the owner-occupier market with smaller, more affordable homes for middle-earners. Founded by a team spanning public sector housing and City

SMALL WORLD

Could micro-apartments be the solution to urban housing shortages?

Alexander Garrett reports



Building the future
The My Micro Apartment project

finance, the company aims to provide homes for first-time buyers at a discount of at least 20 per cent to the market price of surrounding properties. It has won the support of London Mayor Boris Johnson, with a £21.7m interest-free loan from the Greater London Authority, and has already completed more than 100 homes. Pocket's

latest development is Oak Grove – 13 one-bed, 400sq ft apartments in Cricklewood, selling for £264,000 apiece. Pocket's homes are designed to be compact, with clever storage, including a bike store, showers instead of baths and low running costs. The company has just won planning approval for its first big standalone scheme, a 25-storey building in Wandsworth that will offer 63 compact one-bed apartments at affordable prices, each offering 410sq ft of living space.

Other developers have focused on the rental side of the market. Canadian company Realstar Living and startup The Collective – founded by a group of ex-LSE students – both offer variations of micro-flats aimed at young professionals with the emphasis on quality as well as affordability. Nido is another company to jump early on the bandwagon with its tiny but perfectly formed student flats. And a further take on the issue is Y:Cube, a modular prefabricated home concept that has been trialled by the YMCA alongside architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners. These single-occupier prefab flats are just 26sq m and have initially been trialled in Mitcham, with a second Lewisham site in the pipeline.

The Channel 4 series *Amazing Spaces* highlighted the possibilities of small builds, and it's a challenge that has aroused the interest of architects, not least because of the environmental benefits. With housing pressure in London and other major cities set to intensify, for the generation just starting out, micro-living is set to become an increasingly familiar experience. ■

Alexander Garrett is a freelance journalist whose expertise spans the worlds of business and property

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