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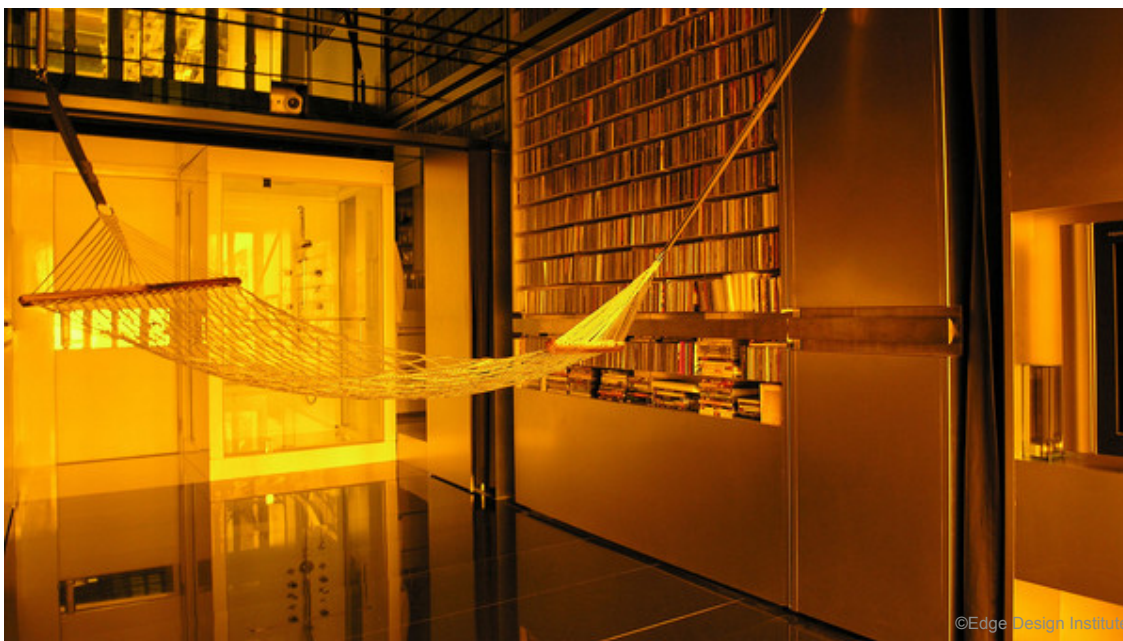
Micro-flats gain favour as the answer to big city urban density

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Carefully designed compact-living for the middle classes is gaining traction in many big cities



Architect Gary Chang's versatile 32 sq metre flat in Hong Kong

The striking thing about architect Gary Chang's flat in Hong Kong is not its size, though at 32 sq metres the place is by most standards teeny. Rather, it is the hazy golden light that permeates the place, the result of yellow filters tacked over the single window. This light bounces off the black lacquer-like ceiling and floor, giving the illusion of depth and height and proving that attentive design can transform spaces, rendering even the small enigmatic and beautiful.

The light is not all that is illusory about his home. With sliding walls, foldable furniture and meticulous storage, what appears to be a shoebox is a micro-flat capable of amazing metamorphoses. A kitchen, bedroom, dining room, home cinema and spa are some of the 24 "configurable"

This is a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom. It's an entirely different way of

rooms possible. Depending on viewpoint, Chang's flat is a bold but looking at a home
 fanciful experiment in compact living or a prototype for the future of
 sustainable urban design. With its sky-high real estate and acute
 shortage of space, Hong Kong's residents are the unwitting pioneers of "micro-living", or habitation
 of spaces in the thick of the city that can be so small they sometimes infringe on building codes. But
 if in Hong Kong tiny, often illegally subdivided flats have long been the lot of the region's poorest
 citizens, carefully designed micro-living for the middle classes is gaining traction worldwide.

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In major cities such as New York, London and Stockholm, housing authorities are beginning to explore micro-flats as one answer to increasing density and the affordable homes crisis. With 54 per cent of the world's population now living in cities, urban housing supplies are already under strain — yet that figure is projected to hit 66 per cent by 2050, according to the UN's *World Urbanization Prospects* report. Meanwhile, the rising cost of real estate in major cities has made property ownership daunting, if not a hopeless dream, for first-time buyers. For singles or couples who prioritise access to vibrant city life, micro-flats are emerging as a compromise between centrality, space and cost.

Chang, the managing director of Edge Design Institute, knows better than most what it means to reside in close quarters. He has lived in his flat in an inconspicuous 1960s high-rise since his family moved there when he was 14. In typical Hong Kong-style the Chang household was subdivided into minuscule rooms including three bedrooms — one for his parents, another for his three sisters and a third for a lodger — a kitchen, bathroom and a hallway where Chang slept on a fold-out bed. After gaining a degree in architecture at the University of Hong Kong he bought the place when his parents moved for \$45,000. It has been his micro-space design project since, with new renovations every five or so years.

Chang names his flat's current interior "Domestic Transformer". To illustrate he walks to a wall and tugs at a panel. Out glides a partition revealing a kitchen with a full-size fridge, oven, dishwasher and Nespresso machine (Chang may compromise on space but, as his heated Japanese toilet suggests, he is unwilling to forego life's small pleasures). With this single motion two "rooms" have been formed — a video gaming area materialised when the television mounted on the non-kitchen side of the partition drew up close to a foldaway sofa.

"In tight spaces rooms start to merge," Chang says. "You don't define your home by the usual gradations: this is a living room, a kitchen, a bedroom. It's an entirely different way of looking at a home." Chang calls it "time-based design", whereby the inhabitant manipulates a single space to suit their activity. "The main idea is that I don't use a tiny part of the space and the rest is not in use. If I'm preparing food the entire place is a dining room and a kitchen."



A cramped flat in Hong Kong

Architects have been thinking about how to live in dense, urban environments for decades. In 1967, Canadian architect Moshe Safdie conceived Habitat 67, a landmark compound in Montreal of 354 prefabricated, concrete forms in varying sizes and configurations that stack together to make 146 homes in central Tokyo. In 1972, Kisho Kurokawa designed Nakagin Capsule Tower, a building of tech-heavy 10 sq metre suites aimed at businessmen wishing to avoid the suburban commute. It remains a prototype for micro-living and inspired the capsule hotel.



The Habitat 67 compound in Montreal

The big global cities will always — and increasingly — attract more people than can comfortably be accommodated. In London, a housing shortage has meant buying a home is near impossible for all but the highest earners or those with an inheritance: a recent KPMG report found a first-time buyer needs to make £77,000 a year to get on the ladder, compared with the average wage of £28,000.



Apartments in Hong Kong

Micro-flats can lessen the financial shock of entering the market. One developer, Pocket, designs affordable, 38 sq metre flats featuring an open-plan kitchen and living room, separate bedroom and wet room in central locations such as Westminster and Brixton (Pocket is not fond of the term “micro-flat” with its implication of compromise and instead calls its units “compact, one-bedroom apartments”). Pocket’s flats are aimed at so-called “city makers”, such as nurses, teachers and IT workers on middle incomes of £30,000-£71,000 (Pocket vets potential buyers and does not sell to those earning more than this). This year the company aims to complete 50 units, with 250 more planned for 2016. More than 19,000 people have registered for flats. “It’s growing really quite fast,” says Lucian Smithers, Pocket’s sales and marketing director.



CGI of a My Micro NY unit in New York by nArchitects

When Pocket was founded 10 years ago the main goal was to build affordable homes for young workers. But the company realised its flats catered for an emerging breed of city dweller, one Smithers calls “post-consumerist”. “They are starting in their careers and want to do the right things in terms of putting down roots and building equity but are

not so driven by status symbols like cars,” he says. “They don’t require so much space for physical belongings and want to keep running costs down so they can live lives to the full.”



CGI of the building process

But while the needs of urbanites may have shifted, housing authorities, on the whole, have been slow to respond. This is felt keenly in New York City, where much of the housing stock is a remnant of post-second world war policies geared towards providing for nuclear families. The city’s glut of two or three-bedroom apartments is not well aligned with modern demographics: in 1970, about a third of New Yorkers were single, but in 2013 that figure had risen to nearly 50 per cent.

The city’s stringent zoning rules, which do not allow new builds to be smaller than 37 sq metres, have exacerbated the housing shortage for singles — and led to the illegal but widespread habit of subdivision.

In 2012, then-mayor Michael Bloomberg temporarily relaxed the city’s zoning rules to launch a competition, adAPT NYC, encouraging designs for one and two-person homes. The winner was My Micro NY by nArchitects, the city’s first micro-flat complex currently being assembled at 335 East 27th Street. The building’s 55 prefabricated, modular units range from 23 sq metres to 34 sq metres, and feature kitchens, wheelchair-accessible bathrooms and small balconies. Despite hyperventilating media coverage — “Desperate New Yorkers to live in glorified shoeboxes” was one headline from the New York Post — there is already a waiting list.

“How Americans think about resources must change, and housing is one aspect of that,” Eric Bunge of nArchitects says. He believes that the gratuitous floor space of recent decades has been an aberration. Living within fewer square metres in dense, walkable centres is his vision of a more eco-conscious future. “It’s not just a question of densifying cities but thinking about optimising the way we live in them,” he says. “Micro-units can be delightful to be in and to live in if well-designed.”

Photographs: Edge Design Institute; Benny Lam/ SoCO/ Rex; Eric Brown/ Alamy; Jan Tong/ EyeEm; Ledaean/ nArchitects

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