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The Power of *Infilltration*

How to encourage multifamily projects and higher densities.

By Elizabeth Austin Lunday

Drive into residential hot spots today and you are likely to see enclaves of development, each filling a specific niche, with multifamily housing strictly separated from single-family homes. Boundaries — even walls — separate each type of housing and each price point.



A different model dominated a century ago, when multifamily housing was integrated into neighborhoods. The occasional garage apartment or granny flat peeks out from the back of a driveway. Single-family houses surround a duplex. A six-flat apartment house takes up a corner lot, and along the edge of the neighborhood stands a courtyard apartment or a row of town houses.

Today cities are seeking to return to the earlier model by encouraging neighborhoods to increase

their densities and the diversity of their housing types. New projects range from 500-square-foot triplexes to luxury high-rise infill towers.

"A wide mix of housing within a neighborhood promotes social and economic sustainability. In the past, that mix was there for a good reason," says Scott Polikov, AICP, a town planner with Gateway Planning Group in Austin, Texas.

While these projects face challenges, from zoning to financing to NIMBY-ism, communities have identified the traits of workable projects and are developing practices that promote success. The result could be a move toward increased neighborhood densities through small-scale multifamily projects.

"I think we're coming to understand that some of the more traditional development patterns have benefits that we have failed to appreciate," says Fernando Costa, AICP, planning director for the city of Ft. Worth.

Density and diversity

Many new infill projects can be classified as "multidwellings" — more than one dwelling unit on a shared lot — including triplexes and fourplexes, cottage clusters, courtyard apartments, town houses, and block-long apartment buildings. Duplexes and row houses, each on their own lot, are not considered multidwellings but are often allowed under the same codes.

Advocates of multidwellings point to several benefits. First, they allow residents to stay in their neighborhoods as their lives — and housing needs — change. "I think a neighborhood is not truly a neighborhood unless you can move up without moving out," says Polikov.

"A mix [of housing] can provide more stability and more choices," says Garet Johnson, AICP, land-use program manager for the city of Charlotte, North Carolina. "It's a way to accommodate people at different points in their life."

Increasing neighborhood density also helps to limit sprawl, the experts say. "The smart growth option is coming to be recognized as more economical and more responsible," Costa says. "It's something we're pursuing with some success and that cities across the country are pursuing as well."

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Particular interest in increasing density through infill and redevelopment has sprung up in urban areas where suburban growth is limited by policy or by geography. Portland, Oregon, with its well-known urban growth boundary, is one example. St. Petersburg, Florida, surrounded by water, is another.

"We're on a peninsula here, and we're completely built out," says Bob Jeffrey, assistant director of development services for St. Petersburg. "We're faced with an incredible affordable housing shortage. We're looking at ways to increase density so we can take the pressure off."

What's getting in the way



Despite increasing interest, small-scale multidwelling projects often struggle to get off the ground. Barriers include a lack of financing, restrictive zoning, and NIMBY-ism.

"Barriers?" laughs Jill Black, a Ft. Worth-based developer, whose four-unit town house project opened in May. "There were barriers in every possible way."

Developers of large multifamily projects have no trouble getting financing from life insurance companies and pension funds, whereas developers of small projects must seek alternative financing, says Mark Steinbeck of Merchants Funding, a Phoenix-based lending company that focuses on multifamily housing investments in the Southwest U.S. Merchants specializes in projects as small as four units and as large as 60 to 90 units. "What we love to deal with is in the \$300,000 to \$3.5 million range," he says.

Zoning and other city ordinances can also pose a barrier, as they did for Black. "It took two years to go through the city's approval process," she says. "It was one headache after another. Although Ft. Worth says it wants to see this type of development, the process isn't set up to handle it."

Like many cities, Ft. Worth is trying to facilitate this type of project, according to Costa, and new codes and city ordinances have been established that accommodate greater densities. The city has designated 13 urban villages, which are zoned under new mixed use classifications that allow a combination of residential and nonresidential uses. Magnolia Green, which includes Black's project, is zoned MU-2, High Intensity Mixed Use. In addition, the city is developing design guidelines for each urban village.

Charlotte is also trying to match planning goals and development needs. The city's general development policies state that the city will "encourage a range of housing types and densities that will meet the needs of different types of households" and "develop multifamily housing as part of the fabric of a larger neighborhood."

Even with those policies in place, the process can still bog down, says Charlotte-based architect and developer David Furman. "The planning commission in Charlotte is first-rate, and the guidelines they have put out are terrific," he says. "The problem is getting the city council to stand behind them."

Community opposition can be fierce — and personal. "The thing that I couldn't deal with was that because you want to do this project, you're an evil person. You're a bad person. You're a criminal," Furman says. Although he developed numerous 30- to 60-unit infill projects in Charlotte's first-ring suburbs over the course of several years, he says he decided to switch to downtown redevelopment because he was tired of being attacked.

Making it work

Despite the roadblocks, small multifamily projects can succeed. Portland is seeing a steady increase in multidwelling projects in existing neighborhoods — 66 percent of all apartment and row house permits from 1997 to 2004 were for projects in medium-density residential zones, according to Bill Cunningham, manager of the city's infill design project, which offers guidance on how to integrate infill projects into their surroundings.

Good placement, planning, and design connect infill projects to the surrounding fabric, making them more acceptable to residents. Cunningham notes that residents are now living in new infill projects in medium-density residential zones and not just in redeveloped areas such as the Pearl District.

Connectivity is another key element in locating multidwelling projects. "These projects need to be near adequate transportation — sidewalks, transit, bike paths," says Charlotte's Gareth Johnson. "You need to look at where that higher density is appropriate, where it can be supported."

Good planning and design are crucial as well. "If your architecture is mediocre, you don't have a chance," says Furman. Good architecture, he says, reflects the design of the neighborhood around it. One of Furman's projects, Queens West in Charlotte, was designed to reflect both the architectural details and the scale of the surrounding housing. The 24-unit town house project was located perpendicular to the street, with the end unit designed to look like a nearby house. "We were able to create the same rhythm on the street and address the aesthetic concerns," Furman says.

One of the goals of Portland's infill design project is to identify the traits of well-designed multidwelling projects. The team has examined different configurations of apartments, town houses, and cottage clusters, highlighting those that work well within their neighborhood. They've found that elements such as facade articulation, materials, window treatments, roof forms, and trim, if well executed, can help integrate a project into a neighborhood. Poor use of these elements can make a project look like an oversized barracks.

Another rule of thumb: The larger the project and the greater its density, the farther it should be from the center of the neighborhood. A large high-rise project is more appropriate on a major corridor on the edge of a neighborhood, while a fourplex works well within a neighborhood.

Architect Chuck Travis, principal of Charlotte-based The Housing Studio, points to two projects in Tampa, Florida, as good examples of this principle. Both are located in the historic Hyde Park neighborhood. Parkside at One Bay Shore, a 104-unit high rise, is located on a major thoroughfare on the edge of the neighborhood while Christiansted, a 22-unit, four-story courtyard project, sits in the middle of the neighborhood. "Christiansted is on a smaller scale, and more integrated into the district," Travis says.

Encouraging good multidwellings



What can cities do to help good projects get off the ground? Planners around the U.S. say the keys to success are listening to neighborhood residents, developing solid guidelines, and smoothing the process.

Austin is in the midst of a neighborhood planning process at the moment. Among other things, the city is looking at housing options for each neighborhood, says Ricardo Soliz, Austin's development services manager. "If the area is a sea of single-family detached housing, we're talking about alternatives for someone who is

single, or newly married, or downsizing — maybe retired. We look at it to see where the limitations are," he says.

Neighborhood planning efforts have identified areas in central Austin, near the University of Texas, that could benefit from fairly dense multidwelling development. The university neighborhood overlay zone, covering an area of 231 acres, was created in 2004 partly to upgrade a warren of student rentals and to reduce spillover of students into nearby neighborhoods. "The basic idea was to up the density in this overlay area," says George Adams, Austin's manager of urban design.

Residents of the surrounding single-family neighborhoods embraced the plan. "We got buy-in from the surrounding neighborhoods beyond anyone's expectations," Adams says. "By introducing 1,500 residential units in the overlay area, we're taking the pressure off surrounding houses."

A second approach is to develop guidance for developers. Portland's infill design project is doing just that. "What we've heard from developers is that the city is good about complaining about what we don't want but not about showing what we do want," says Bill Cunningham. "Now we're trying to show housing configurations that meet our regulatory standards and market needs."

The city expects to create a "plan book" of 12 infill prototypes that can be approved under current regulations and meet community design goals. To do that, Cunningham's group is considering which housing types and parking arrangements best meet design expectations.

A common criticism of row houses and small apartment complexes is that driveways and parking dominate at street level. In response, the city has examined creative approaches such as rear parking, shared lanes, and partially excavated basement parking. "We've done a lot of row houses with front garages, but we're seeing if we can get beyond that," Cunningham says.

A final step in attracting good multidwelling projects is to streamline city codes and ordinances. Portland's infill design project has found that the city's code provisions on lot depth and driveway widths actually encourage the very type of parking the city now wants to avoid — cars parked the width of a duplex, town house, or apartment building, overwhelming the street-level view of the project. The project team proposes revising regulations to allow narrower driveways or shared driveways and to limit front parking on all new projects.

To identify other barriers, the project team has done "code modeling" — exploring how codes would be applied to different infill arrangements. For example, the team examined how various housing types would be treated under current codes. They found that shared-street courtyard housing, in which row house-type units front a privately owned "shared street" designed to accommodate both cars and pedestrians, was prohibited because current codes require streets to have grade-separated sidewalks, resulting in impractical right-of-way widths on small infill sites.

As a result, the team is proposing zoning code amendments that would address the barriers identified in the code modeling process. These would include provisions to facilitate courtyard-oriented housing and other alternative housing arrangements, including allowance for shared-street designs.

However, Cunningham says that transportation requirements, building codes, and fire codes can also work against multidwelling development. Town house clusters, in which some town houses face the street and others the rear or a courtyard, are prohibited under a code that requires all lots to have a street frontage, in part to accommodate water lines. The project team has identified this limitation and brought it to the city's attention.

The team's goal is to make good design the path of least resistance for developers. "We want to highlight those strategies that succeed," says Cunningham.

Increasing housing diversity

Although multidwellings often go hand in hand with infill or redevelopment, most new subdivisions tend to segregate different types of housing and different densities.

It doesn't have to be that way, says Scott Polikov, who has worked with several Texas cities to develop zoning codes for new neighborhoods that include a mix of housing types. At Craig Ranch in McKinney and the Mills Branch district in Lancaster, these codes are now in effect.

"The codes require two things: a minimum number of housing types and performance standards," says Polikov.

The codes identify seven housing types and specify that a minimum number of housing types must be included within each zoned area. A primarily residential area might include a mix of single-family houses, duplexes, and end-cap apartments (small apartment units located at the end of a street between individual houses and a corridor street.) An urban center might call for a mix of high-rise apartments and row houses. Yet another area might include courtyard apartments and cottage clusters.

Performance standards address architecture as well as how the buildings function as part of the neighborhood. "Multifamily projects should function not as enclaves but as part of the existing neighborhood fabric," says Polikov.

Multidwelling in America

Many people think that higher densities are the wave of the future. "I think as cities continue to sprawl and be more expensive, as gas prices continue to increase, anything on the interior becomes more and more valuable," says Mark Steinbeck. "Price continues to be an issue for starter homes, and many homes are out of reach for a first-time purchase. More people are turning to condos and town homes."

Cities can encourage these projects by understanding what makes multidwellings succeed, listening to neighborhoods, providing guidance to developers, and eliminating barriers.

"These projects can be a struggle because we're calling upon the public to rethink certain basic assumptions about what is or what isn't desirable about our communities," says Fernando Costa. "But on reflection it makes sense to pursue greater density, a greater mix of housing, and more integration within neighborhoods."

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The Return of the Garage Apartment

Austin, Texas, sees accessory housing as a straightforward way to increase density. Owners of single-family lots with at least 7,000 square feet can build a garage apartment or granny flat as of right, says Ricardo Soliz. Now the city is thinking of reducing the minimum to 5,750 square feet. "Particularly for people concerned about increased property taxes, it's a way of earning some extra income while providing new housing options," Soliz adds.

St. Petersburg, Florida, is using a similar approach. "Instead of knocking down houses to have duplexes or other multifamily projects, you allow the option of additional units on the lot," says Bob Jeffrey. "On the street, the neighborhoods stay the same, but it takes the pressure off house redevelopment."

St. Petersburg's new initiative is expected to be adopted by the city council in late summer 2006 and could take effect next fall. The code requires units to have parking and windows that won't look into neighbors' yards, eliminating major community concerns.

Resources

Images: Top — Architectural elements and the proper scale help these multifamily projects in Tampa, Florida, blend into the neighborhood. Image The Housing Studio. Middle — In Ft. Worth, the lofts on Fairmont faced financing and zoning challenges. Photo by Elizabeth Lunday. Bottom — Innovative approaches can provide parking without making a driveway dominate the building. This multifamily in Portland, Oregon, uses partially excavated, below-grade parking. Photo by Infill Design Project, Portland Bureau of Planning.

For more on Ft. Worth's urban villages: www.fortworthgov.org.

Portland's infill design project is at www.portlandonline.com.

Austin's university neighborhood overlay zone is at www.ci.austin.tx.us/development/zoning.htm .

And see www.craig-ranchtx.com for details on Craig Ranch in McKinney, Texas.