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Unico using modular units to build 'iPod apartments'

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Photo courtesy of Mithun [\[enlarge\]](#)

The developer will build up to 500 green units aimed at young, mobile people who like living in dense urban environments.

Unico Properties is going mod. Modular, that is. The property management and real estate development company plans to construct several apartment buildings in Seattle and Portland over the next 12 to 15 months using modular, pre-fabricated apartment units that can be linked and stacked.

The project is called “inhabit.” It will target LEED certification and Unico said it represents the future of urban living.

The inhabit units were designed by Mithun and Seattle's HyBrid Architecture. They can be linked together in groups of 50 to 100 units, and stacked up to five units high. The units will come in studio to three-bedroom size and can be arranged to fit a building site.

Unico is targeting the Generation-Y renter, said Unico President and CEO Dale Sperling. One Unico project manager calls inhabit “the iPod of apartments.”

Prototypes on display

Two prototype inhabit modular

“We're targeting these young, mobile people. They're more comfortable living in dense urban environments,” Sperling said. “They are design-conscious, they are high-tech conscious and they are environmentally conscious.”

The company has spent the last two years developing the inhabit design.

Unico will likely target a LEED rating for inhabit, though the specific level will depend on final products and sites. The wood-frame units will have double-paned, energy-efficient windows, engineered wood floors and framing that minimizes the use of first-generation wood. They will use energy-efficient heat pumps, dual-flush toilets and lightweight decking made of recycled plastic and cellulose. Flat roofs with green roof systems will reduce stormwater runoff. Exterior daylighting and heat-reflecting construction materials will reduce energy costs.

The pre-market costs will be lower than with traditional construction but Sperling said because the project is still in early development, prices are not yet set. He would not release construction costs because he said the company is still negotiating with builders and finding sites.

He said the rents would likely start at the higher end of middle-market but could move to lower-middle market as more projects get underway. Studios will be about 450 square feet and one-bedrooms about 650. The apartments are on the small end, Sperling said, because that fits better with what generation Y renters want: they're willing to give up space in order to live in stylish, green apartments close to shops and restaurants.

They also will have smaller appliances, including a ventless combination washer-dryer.

Sperling said Unico is seeking investors and doing focus-group studies on the design. They are also scouting sites, looking for urban in-fill areas. He said Fremont, First Hill, Capitol Hill and Wallingford in Seattle, and East Portland neighborhoods look promising. They will also look at suburban sites, Sperling said, as long as transit and shops are close. The company wants to do an initial production run of 300 to 500 units.

The modular units can be completed on a tighter schedule than traditional construction, Sperling said. In building two prototypes, Unico learned that the permit approval process can take as little as six days, and manufacturing as little as three weeks.

Smaller multi-family projects in Seattle have tried to use modular units to save money and meet tight construction time-lines, including Fremont's six-unit Red 4217, designed in 2004 by Weber + Thompson. But the modular company went out of business and that project was built using wood-frame construction instead.

apartments will be on display from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on weekdays from Oct. 15 through mid-November at the Rainier Square roof park on Fifth Avenue between Union and University streets.

The units were built in a modular factory, Transform, in Burlington. Interior design was provided by Seattle's Vision Art.

Designers have also been concerned about the quality of modular design.

But Sperling said inhabit is different from previous modular projects because of its high-quality, high-technology design.

“That’s why it took us so long to get it right,” Sperling said. “This took us two years and a boatload of capital investment.”

Sperling said the hip, green modular model has already worked well in Europe. He said the company looked to projects like MoHo by Urban Splash in Manchester, England, and other projects in Sweden.

For more information, go to: http://www.unicoprop.com/properties/inhabit_about.html