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Kristin Osborne of Technology Alliance takes a break Wednesday at the Rainier Square roof park where a pair of Unico stackable modular apartments, in background, are on display. (Grant M. Haller / P-I)

Affordable housing may come factory-built

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P-I REPORTER

Call it an iHome or maybe a really big Lego.

In any case, the modular apartments Unico Properties plans to build -- make that, install -- in Seattle are different.

"This is the iPhone equivalent for housing," Unico Vice President Jonas Sylvester said Wednesday afternoon, while standing in one of two stacked homes the company built at a Burlington factory, trucked to downtown Seattle and lifted by crane onto the rooftop park at Rainier Square.

Here's the idea. Construction costs have gotten so high that it's hard to build housing for people making typical incomes without a subsidy. Modular apartments are faster to build and less expensive.

Unico executives would not say how much cheaper the modular homes are -- "That's proprietary," Unico President and Chief Executive Dale Sperling said. But they said going modular cuts the total time of a project, from securing a site to when people move in, about in half.

Unico's target market for the Inhabit apartments are young professionals who are mobile, educated, adept with technology and like something environmentally responsible with design flair. The model units feature modern lines and fixtures, accented with touches such as a porcelain dog resting on a lime shag rug under a glass-and-chrome coffee table in front of a white vinyl couch.

There's an integrated computer system that controls the lights, heating and cooling, and audio and video systems. Green features include energy-efficient windows and systems, sustainable wood floors and framing, recycled decking and a green roof system.

The units are 15 feet wide and 45 feet long, although they can be coupled side by side to create apartments with up to three bedrooms; some also sacrifice indoor length for outdoor decks. They can be stacked up to five high and arranged lengthwise or widthwise in rows to create apartment buildings with up to 100 units.

Unico took two years to design and build the first apartments, working with two Seattle architecture firms: Mithun and HyBrid Architecture. Company executives want to start installing the apartments in hip, urban neighborhoods of Seattle and Portland within the next two years.

They did not have specifics on how much the apartments would cost but said they are aiming for renters making 80 percent to 150 percent of median incomes.

Seattle officials have talked a lot in recent months about trying to find ways to create more housing affordable for typical workers.

"We're positive about anything that has potential for lowering the cost," Bill Rumpf, deputy director of the Seattle Office of Housing, said Wednesday.

Alan Justad, spokesman for the city Department of Planning and Development, said the city's role in most modular homes is just to inspect and permit the foundation; the state is responsible for the homes themselves at the factories.

Modular apartments are catching on in places such as Manchester, England, where the developer Urban Splash recently started a Moho (Modular homes) project.

The Seattle housing agency HomeSight used modular construction on stand-alone houses to cut prices for homes in Noji Gardens, in South Seattle.

Matthew Gardner, a Seattle land-use economist who has worked for Unico, but not on this project, said the apartments could find a good market in Seattle if they can offer lower rents than other new buildings.

"There's a majorly untapped market that this kind of product could really cater to," he said. "It really has the potential to take off here."

Unico executives realize modular apartments might meet with some skepticism from city residents but note that the installation would be much less disruptive to neighborhoods than traditional construction. They think the design of the homes will win people over.

"That's why we did this," Sperling said of the downtown demonstration.

MODULAR DEMONSTRATION



zoom

Grant M. Haller / P-I

Dale Sperling, Unico president and CEO, opens a modular apartment's sliding glass door to the deck where Unico Vice President Jonas Sylvester, left, and Robert Miranda sit.

Two Inhabit modular apartments will be on display downtown, with tours from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., weekdays, Monday through mid-November. The homes are on the roof park at Rainier Square, which is in the 1300 block of Fifth Avenue.

Details: Go to unicoprop.com and click on "properties" and then "inhabit."

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