

Modern House Magazine

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Modular Cities

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We may be on the verge of a whole new genre of smaller more sustainable housing - this much is not all that surprising to those who closely follow housing trends. But if Dale Sperling, President of Unico Properties in Seattle, has his way, we'll also be living in entire communities of the latest modular house designs. "We have a unique opportunity to change the economic, environmental and social factors of multifamily real estate," Sperling said when announcing the company's plans to use shipping containers to build multifamily housing.

While Unico may be behaving like trailblazers, it's not without doing their homework. The decision to be the first in Seattle to use modular units for multifamily housing was prefaced by building an actual prototype and setting it smack down in the middle of downtown Seattle.

An estimated 1500 people later toured the prototype units and 200 visitors selected at random gave positive feedback, "We found that our target renters were indifferent to the fact that the apartments were built offsite. Renters who want to live in the city were willing to trade off larger space for smaller, more efficient units that are well designed and feature higher-end finishes" said Jonas Sylvester, Senior Vice President of Investments and Development at Unico.

Still, in the current economy building any kind of new housing seems speculative at best, and especially for multifamily projects that have to bet on "selling" multiple leases, but Jonas Sylvester says "Unico is making an investment on a long-term development approach." And while admitting the economic morose conditions "pose a number of problems" Sylvester also says Unico is undeterred, "those factors in and of themselves do not impact our decision to pursue modular construction but impact timing on development decisions in general."

Boxed Up

The multifamily project itself called "Inhabit" features the design work of a Seattle architectural and design firm who specializes in converting old shipping containers into modern modular housing. Explaining why Unico contacted Hybrid Seattle for the project Sylvester said "Our mantra is to build smaller units that offer more efficient layouts and higher-end finishes." Hybrid Seattle (see our story for more) who calls their work "Cargotecture" fit the bill and had already made news as far back as 2003 when they proposed "Cargotown," a multi-unit complex for a Seattle waterfront revitalization competition.

What makes shipping containers practical for multifamily use though is the ease with which you can stack the units to instantly create whole new levels. The prototype for Inhabit was put together in just three weeks. Another firm SG Blocks is using shipping containers to quickly build housing for the 2010 winter Olympics in Vancouver, just a short distance from Seattle.

What may be especially attractive moving forward, not just for Unico but other multifamily developers, is an economic advantage acquired from using Hybrid Seattle's shipping containers as a building medium. Built in a controlled environment and then shipped to the property site where awaiting cranes lift the containers into place developers can save on labor, materials, and the critical time-to-market factor. It also makes working conditions in rain soaked Seattle a lot more suitable.

In fact this is a lure not lost on Unico, "Our goal was to build apartments that lease for less than the surrounding market rate developments by controlling costs through offsite construction and smaller efficiently designed spaces," said Sylvester. It also stands to reason in the current economy more developers may be willing to try something new if they think it can save money.

Surprise Box

Inhabit will be different than anything yet seen in Seattle, and that alone should cultivate more interest. The 66-unit apartment project will terrace up a hillside and offer views of Lake Union and the city skyline. Plus urban workers will have access to major transit lines - important in Seattle, one of the few major cities that has taken to using public transportation.

When you enter the apartment the eventual residents will totally forget they live in a shipping container. The latest materials mask any recognition of the metal box leaving you with simple clean lines and a neutral pallet typical of modern architecture - though usually priced at a much higher premium.

But today modern design must also be coupled with green credentials that sustain future building (especially in a green aware city like Seattle). Sylvester says "Each of our Inhabit projects will strive for LEED certification, built using the latest green materials and practices." This includes energy efficient heat pumps, double-paned windows, engineered wood floors, decking made from recycled plastic, and a green roof system to reduce storm water runoff. Plus, it can be easy to forget the actual containers themselves are being up-cycled - used for a higher purpose.

Boxed In

It's too early to know if we'll actually see a movement en masse to modular multifamily units, and given the current state of things it's even too early to know for sure if Inhabit will be completed as scheduled. Sylvester says the Unico project "is expected to open in 2010," but coming off a year in which literally hundreds of multifamily projects either failed or were postponed we'll all have to wait and see together.

In time though the potential for using shipping containers to reduce costs for both developers and homeowners (or renters), not to mention temporary housing for large populations due to natural disasters is eye-opening.

More importantly, Unico's long-term commitment approach to the situation seems the prudent course of action given that neither the housing industry or the economy in general will be returning to the previous frenzied state anytime soon.

It's a good bet though that the supply of empty containers will eventually pull in demand, after which demand for these low-cost high-end houses will start to push supply. Either way though, Unico deserves applause for sailing into largely uncharted waters, and for "thinking outside the box."