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If there is anything that breaks categories, it is low-rise, high density housing - by Thomas House

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If there is anything that breaks categories, it's low-rise, high density housing, which for practical purposes, we will define as being 4 (or 5) stories tall, usually with a commercial or retail first-floor platform.

This model has a number of advantages:

- Lower development cost;
- Public-transportation friendly in zoning-encumbered inner suburbs;
- Ideal for low-income and mixed-income development;
- Can be wrapped around, or shelter, open space;
- Downtown-quality first floor retail space is almost always an upgrade; and
- Family friendly.

It is, in fact, so useful, you can find some striking examples of the form in the rapidly-gentrifying Boston neighborhoods around Andrew Sq. (Dorchester and South Boston).

Historically, there's nothing new about low-rise housing - hereabouts, a drive on Commonwealth Ave. is all you need to see it in its historic glory.

What's new is an opportunity to develop zoning-constrained neighborhoods and locations.

Global consultant WSP notes that "mid-rise urbanism" has been an ongoing trend in Europe for a century, and notable practitioners include Mies Van de Rohe and Renzo Piano; the movement gained traction in the U.S. in the 1970s in what is now a hipster neighborhood, Brooklyn.

On the west coast, rapid growth can be accommodated (or generated, see Brooklyn) by the availability of housing that can be built to meet a variety of budgets – and to attract new businesses to employ the home owners/tenants.

In San Antonio, the city's proposed master plan favors such projects as part of their high-priority land use plan – low-rise, high density housing, located in close proximity to transit facilities, is seen as a way to accommodate growth while minimizing impact to the city's livability.

A New England example we've cited before – the Rantoul St. redevelopment project in Beverly – deploys low-rise, high density housing as part of a transit-oriented design renewal program located walking distance from the Beverly Depot commuter rail station.

Once-decrepit tenements are being replaced by four projects of 45, 38, 72, and 62 apartments, from three to five stories built over street-level retail and office space.

These projects are at minimum a two-fer, providing affordable housing and renewing aging streetscapes; increased taxability mitigates or pays for infrastructure improvements that pass through these neighborhoods.

In Portsmouth, N.H., a 64-unit low-rise, high density “workforce housing” income-sensitive project is on the boards, which will be located downtown. The Portsmouth Housing Authority, citing the effect of a lack of affordable housing is looking to inject one and two-bedroom living units in an area that could soon be overwhelmed by commercial and hospitality space – these units will be walking distance to everything in the city's iconic downtown.

In addition, new residents, customers, and businesses bring new energy, improve a neighborhoods livability and viability, and if you're lucky, a craft-brew pub or gastroburger joint.

In some New England cities and towns, there are financial incentives for building affordable housing, or initiating a transportation-oriented design program.

Projects like this cost 40% less per unit to build than high-rise, not only because the structural requirements are less costly, but fire codes in particular are less complex. Further lowering your bottom-line costs are the reduced utility requirements, and the city avoids the impact on a wastewater system a higher rise project would bring.

But cost is hardly the only factor. Bloomberg, in a recent article about these four and five-story projects, writes that “these buildings wouldn't be going up if no one wanted to move in, of course. Growing demand, brought on by demographic shifts, job-growth patterns, and a renewed taste among affluent Americans for city (or city like) living, has shaped the mid-rise boom.”

They also noted the ease of zoning, in terms of getting up an investor-friendly project with minimum hassle, “The boom has also been shaped by zoning that sometimes leaves downtowns and suburban commercial districts as the only practical spots for new housing.”

As we see in the Portsmouth and Beverly instances – and in many others – the city itself is an ally...for a change.

In an age of extremes, the profitable answer, it seems, can be found in the middle.

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