

IS HIGH DENSITY A SOLUTION TO CALIFORNIA'S HOUSING CRISIS?

Building up and not out may be the solution many Western urban cores should embrace to provide housing to the masses.

By Matthew McLarand

While the latest demographic reports may show that California is experiencing slowing population growth, the housing crisis is far from being resolved. Decades of under-building combined with a dynamic economy and steady job growth have put relentless pressure on key markets like Los Angeles, the Bay Area and Orange County, with an estimated shortage of 3.3 million units across the state. At the same time, California environmental protections, an abundance of outdated industrial and commercial zones, and a myriad of local regulations and code interpretations have restricted land eligible for development and increased the cost of housing that does get built. High density is emerging as a solution for developers, renters and municipalities given the prohibitively expensive cost of land in these desirable markets.

High Density Benefits for Developers, Renters

High density enables developers to offset the cost of land in attractive markets by increasing the number of rentable units through the construction of higher buildings and micro-units. These micro-units are compact, flex units that can be as small as 400 square feet. Developers are building mixed-used residential complexes that combine on-site dining and retail options, as well as a host of luxury amenities, to keep these high-density developments attractive despite the loss of habitable space.

Many young adults grew up with parents who commuted long distances to work. This is a lifestyle many of

today's renters quickly realized they do not want for themselves. An increasing number of Millennials and urban dwellers are willing to forego spacious living spaces in exchange for communal amenities and walkability to nearby retail and restaurants. In addition, mixed-used developments harmoniously bring together residents and retail to create live-work-play hubs, or micro-economies. A benefit of these micro-economies is that they reduce traffic and pollution and create well-connected, walkable, social communities in urban centers.

Considerations for High-Density Developments

Developers and architects need to consider such factors as the marketplace in the desired area, cost of land and possible rent payouts when determining if high density is a viable option for a specific project. These factors play a significant role in the level of high density that is possible to achieve. For example, 30 units per acre in Huntington Beach, Calif., is considered high density, while in Downtown Los Angeles, it's more than 300 units per acre.

To obtain higher densities, building typology typically changes from wood-frame construction (Type III or V) to concrete and steel-framed construction (Type I or II), particularly as building height increases. These high-rise, Type I buildings are often built in downtown districts where rent rates are high enough to offset the cost of expensive materials, labor and land. These are also typically the areas where required densities are allowed.

New high-density solutions are emerging in other urban areas where high-rise Type I buildings are not a viable option. These solutions include modular and pre-fabricated construction techniques. MVE has taken a different approach and developed new building systems that enable unprecedented levels of density to be reached in mid-rise buildings, while offering a high-quality and code-compliant living environment at a lower construction cost. These new building systems are a hybrid of construction Type I and Type III. They are composed of three levels of Type I construction from grade to a level-4 podium, with five levels of Type III construction rising above the podium. Several of these projects are already in the works, including Holland Partner Group's Pacific Pine in Long Beach, Calif., which will be MVE's densest Type III project to date. The mixed-use development will include 274 units at an average of 900 square feet on an acre of land.

Municipalities are Key to the Development of High Density

Beyond building types, developers need to take a close look at the permitted and desired densities of an area where they are looking to place high-density developments. While many municipalities in Los Angeles County and the Bay Area are embracing high density to solve their housing needs, others are still showing signs of reluctance. Thus, challenges with high density can vary greatly by municipality depending on their code interpretations. MVE recently encountered a city grappling with the chal-

lenges of density on a high-rise infill site the firm is designing. The city's department mandated that the developer provide a tiller truck and training for that apparatus as a condition of approval, even though fire access met code.

However, certain cities have found high density to be a viable long-term solution for their congested urban centers that often lack sufficient parking. Many are implementing transit-oriented community incentive plans to kickstart the development of high-density housing near mass transit hubs so residents can easily get around without cars. Most often, these cities also use high density as a tool to increase the number of affordable housing units by imposing ratio on developers.

Some municipalities are integrating high density to revitalize neighborhoods traditionally overlooked by developers and renters. Municipalities in Downtown Los Angeles have allowed the rezoning of buildable urban land with outdated industrial or commercial spaces into residential and retail. The result is an influx of residents and retail amenities, which breathe new life into these neighborhoods. A perfect illustration of this trend is Main Street Park, an eight-story, mixed-use building straddling the Fashion and South Park districts, which MVE is designing for Jade Enterprises. Originally zoned for commercial, the Los Angeles project will replace a series of one-story commercial buildings with 379 new units of housing and roughly 26,000 square feet of retail and office space that will contribute to the revitalization of this up-and-coming neighborhood.

The future of high density is bright in California. The solution to housing shortages in urban areas where we see a desire to move swiftly and conveniently without getting in and out of cars is not going to be found in suburban sprawls and single-family homes. High density is a win-win for communities, developers and renters, and offers an efficient use of space, greater mobility and an enhanced quality of life.



McLarand



Holland Partner Group's 271-unit Pacific Pine in Long Beach, Calif., will be MVE's densest Type III project to date.

Matthew McLarand, President and Director of Design, MVE + Partners in Irvine, Calif.