Housing With Dignity: A Post-Occupancy Evaluation of Single Resident Occupancy Units

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Full Refereed Papers

Residential Environments

This paper reports on a post-occupancy evaluation (POE) of single resident occupancy (SRO) units. The evaluation team investigated current conditions in several SRO buildings in San Francisco, California and developed recommendations for future projects. The research, conducted as part of a POE course at the University of Oregon, incorporated surveys, interviews, focus group meetings, and behavior observations. The study findings indicate that the size of individual rooms is less important than the configuration of those rooms and their relationship to easily accessible common areas, which include small, shared kitchens and secure bathroom suites.

Introduction

Although Nikki had recently lost her vision due to a stigmatism triggered by the AIDS virus and was in constant pain, her problems seemed to disappear when she described her small home. She happily listed all of her belongings that made her room feel like a home: a fridge, a stove with a two-burner range, a bathroom, a table, and a TV. She also felt safe in her room and loved to socialize with the staff and residents in her building. She was hospitalized in 2005 and recounted with endearment all of the visitors from her apartment building – the SOMA Studios.

Developed by the non-profit Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corporation (TNDC), the studios in which Nikki lives are one of the few affordable housing options in San Francisco. The TNDC provides housing to very low-income and recently homeless people. Because of its projected expansion, the TNDC sought out an evaluation for two SRO buildings and one studio apartment building. SRO buildings have single room units with shared cooking facilities that, as Linhorst (1991) found offer residents privacy, personal freedom, and a sense of community. Some SRO units include a private toilet, but they do not have full kitchens. San Francisco's 20,000 SRO units typically range in size from 100 to 200 square feet and rent for $500 or more per month (Asher, 2007). Affordable studio apartments are somewhat like SROs – they are single room units but they also include a full private bathroom and a full kitchen with an oven. The TNDC studios are 325 square feet and rent for over $500 per month.

While sustainability is often considered in environmental or economic terms, the concept of social sustainability, where socio-cultural diversity can be sustained over time is equally relevant. As Groth (1999) notes, SROs are an integral part of America's affordable housing supply. SROs typically provide housing for residents with incomes approximately 50% below the poverty line (Antolin, 1989). While urban areas have many service jobs, the low pay makes living near them quite difficult. As a result, the jobs-housing balance of many urban areas has become skewed, with affordable housing in the suburban fringe and plentiful jobs in the urban core due to this separation. This study considers one small aspect of what Dubourg and Hamilton (1997) consider social sustainability and it investigates ways in which housing has been provided to the poorest residents of an urban center.

The SRO is the lowest rung of the housing ladder, and in this research many of the residents were low paid maids, janitors, and dishwashers. Their units enabled them to save for a future for either themselves or their families. One middle-aged man who worked as a short-order cook had saved enough money by living in a 10'x13' room for over 20 years to send his four children to college. Another middle-aged woman who worked as a maid in a nearby hotel had saved enough money living in her room to build a small home for her elderly mother. The findings suggest that dignified living can occur in even the most minimal space – provided it meets basic needs for privacy, security, and community.

The research was conducted by a team from the University of Oregon School of Architecture and Allied Arts in the fall of 2005 as part of a post-occupancy evaluation (POE) course. A POE is a research process commonly used to evaluate the performance of buildings and suggest solutions for improving the relationship between the people and the environment (see Preiser, Rabinowitz, and White, 1988; Vischer, 2001). The team investigated three buildings operated by the TNDC in San Francisco: the West, the CCR, and the SOMA Studios.

Case Study Sites

The case study sites selected represented three common ways in which SRO buildings are created: wholesale renovation of an older building (The West), minor changes to an older building (the CCR), and new construction (SOMA Studios). The West Hotel (figure 1), an SRO building with 105 units, features rooms with private toilets, sinks, mini refrigerators, and microwaves. The West is a mixed-use building and its commercial tenant is "The Tea House," a

pornographic theater on the first floor. The West's first floor also includes a reception desk, lobby, "library," and offices.

Figure 1: The West

The Civic Center Residence (CCR) (figure 2) is a 202-unit SRO building. All units include a sink and small closet. Shared bathrooms for each gender are on every floor. CCR's first floor has a large lobby, TV room, and library. The basement includes a laundry room, communal kitchen, and computer room used for classes.

Figure 2: The CCR

The SOMA Studios (figure 3), built in 2003, has 88 units, each with a full bathroom and kitchen. The lower floor of the building also includes 22,000 square feet of retail space. Public amenities of the building include an outdoor courtyard, television room, activity room, lending libraries, and a childcare center.

Figure 3: SOMA Studios

Methodology

To triangulate the data set, the research team used three methods: surveys, interviews, and observations. Nine researchers spent 360 hours conducting on site research and gathered 151 surveys, conducted 57 interviews, held five focus group meetings, and evaluated seventeen private rooms.

Surveys

Three different surveys focused on specific areas of each building: staff areas, public spaces, and private units. Each research team handed out surveys in person at the building site to residents, staff, and visitors over a three-day period. All survey participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction of different aspects of the building on a five-point scale from "Excellent" to "Poor." As a percentage of residents, the survey response rate was reasonable - from 10-32 percent of the total residents in each building responded.

Interviews

Interview questions covered public spaces, private units, and TNDC services. Interviews were conducted in the lobby or, if permitted by the resident, in private units. While one member of the research team conducted the interview, a second member observed the layout of the room and took notes. In addition to individual interviews, the research teams conducted five focus group meetings held in each building's meeting room. Flyers posted around the buildings advertised the meetings and between 5 and 10 residents attended. The format of the focus group was

more open than the individual interviews, taking on a conversational atmosphere.

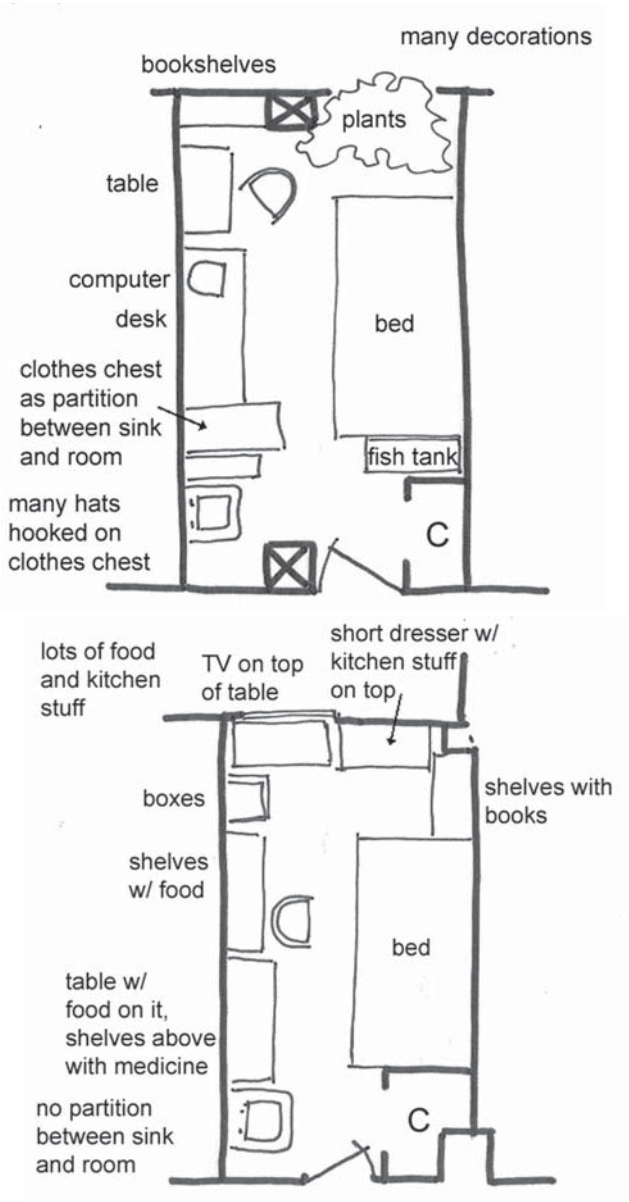
Observations

The research team conducted behavioral and physical trace observations following Zeisel's (1984) model. Researchers were able to visit the building's public spaces throughout the day. Observations in private units occurred only when the resident invited the team into a room. Because of this, the data is statistically low for physical trace observations in units. Nevertheless, opportunities to enter a private dwelling and record data were extremely insightful since they offered us a chance to see rooms in use.

Analysis

The analysis began with the calculation of numerical scores for the quantifiable survey responses. This information was cross-referenced against the data collected in the interviews and observations. The analysis found that the performance of the private units, shared kitchens, and common bathrooms generated the most concern among residents. Of lesser concern were the institutional finishes used in the buildings, the laundry room locations (in the basement), and the functioning of the lobbies. Given this, the analysis below focuses on the units themselves and their relationship to kitchens and bathrooms.

Figure 4: Entering George's room at the CCR meant that he first had to move his "stuff" away from the door.



Figures 5 and 6: Comparative analysis of two CCR rooms.

Private Rooms

Most surprisingly, the analysis found that overall unit size was not especially important. Additionally, since all units had at least one operable window, light and ventilation were not seen as problems by the residents. The most common complaints about units were lack of storage and, at the CCR, lack of private toilets. With very small living spaces (figures 4-6), room layout became critical.

Unit Size

While a few residents expressed dissatisfaction with the size of their units, others recognized that larger units would require higher rents. Of survey respondents, 90 percent rated their unit size as "Good" or "Excellent." Below are plans for a typical unit in each building (figure 7):

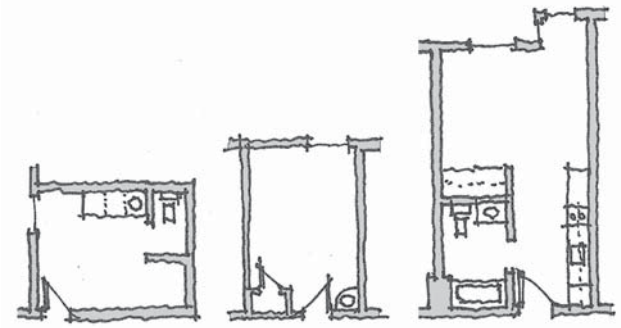


Figure 7: A room at the west (left) – 130 square feet with private toilet, sink, under-counter refrigerator, and wardrobe. A room at the CCR (middle) – 135 square feet with a sink and small closet. A room at the SOMA Studios (right) – 325 square feet with a kitchenette, bathroom, and closet.

Personal Storage

Lack of storage was a clear problem. One resident had to move some of his belongings into the hall to make space for the research team to enter. His bed was barely visible beneath piles of his possessions. Hill and Stamey (1990) found that maintaining what few possessions they have is especially important for homeless people. Given that many residents are recently homeless, this finding is applicable to SROs. All three buildings had very little room for storage (figure 8), typically eight to ten square feet in a small closet and, at the West and SOMA, a few linear feet of cabinets under a sink base.

Figure 8: A typical room at the CCR – filled to capacity

In terms of closet design, swinging doors with hooks, racks, or mirrors on the backside offered advantages over sliding doors. At the CCR, when the closet door was across from the sink, the wall facing the main room functioned as the headboard giving a small bit of much-needed privacy (figure 9).

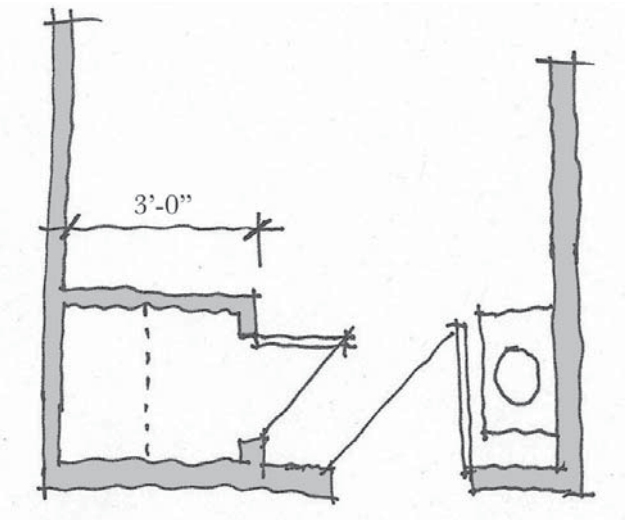


Figure 9: When the closet door was in this configuration, the head of the bed could be placed against the closet, obstructing views from the hallway.

Noise Control

Noise transmission between rooms can affect a tenant's comfort and sense of privacy. Noise control was rated by 52 percent of survey participants as either "Excellent" or "Good," with the remainder rating the noise level "Fair" or "Poor". This split decision suggests that noise is not a universal problem. Residents were least satisfied with noise control in units in the middle of the floor since these rooms had the most people passing by them on a regular basis.

Cooking

Another area of concern for many residents of the CCR and West was the lack of a place to prepare quick meals without going down to common kitchens in the basements. The existing in-room sinks, which residents used to meet some of their washing and food preparation needs, were very popular. The next level would be to provide in-room quick cooking capabilities with an under-counter refrigerator, microwave, and storage area for utensils and food.

Shared Kitchens

In the West and the CCR, the only shared kitchen is in the basement. It is difficult to travel down the hall, to the elevator, and then to the kitchen with cooking supplies and then back up with food leftovers (many residents

do not want to leave food in the shared refrigerators). In focus groups, residents described the basement kitchens as "unfriendly" and "insecure." At the CCR, 57 percent of residents rarely use the kitchen. Fighting, "bossy people", food being stolen, and the inconvenience of the basement location were commonly stated deterrents to use.

Common Bathrooms

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Bathing and using the toilet are private activities. The primary complaint about the shared bathrooms in the CCR and the West was the lack of privacy. Of the residents surveyed, 76 percent in the CCR considered bathroom privacy fair or poor. Of significant concern was the fact that several residents said that they had been walked in on while taking a shower or using the toilet in the dorm style bathroom at the CCR. However, a bathroom in every room takes up considerable space (and money). A balance should be found that meets the needs of residents while also meeting the demands of the developer. At the West, 68 units include toilets and 37 units have a full bath. Even though most residents must use the private showers or bathtubs accessed from the hall, in 34 completed surveys, only three residents listed the lack of a bathtub or a shower as one of the top three worst things about their units.

Key Recommendations

From this analysis, the research team came up with several recommendations.

Livable Rooms

To make the rooms as livable as possible, they should include a kitchenette with a small refrigerator, sink, and microwave, and where practical, a toilet stall. To control noise, these "wet" functions should be placed in a small vestibule that adds a layer of "service" space between the hallways and the sleeping areas (figure 10). While this adds expense (additional framing and another door), it can greatly enhance acoustic privacy and provide more storage in the closet, on the back of the extra door, and in the sink area. In rooms with toilets (as is the case at the West), the vestibule can be enlarged to accommodate space for a small desk. Work spaces are increasingly common – over half the rooms we visited had some kind of desk and a computer.

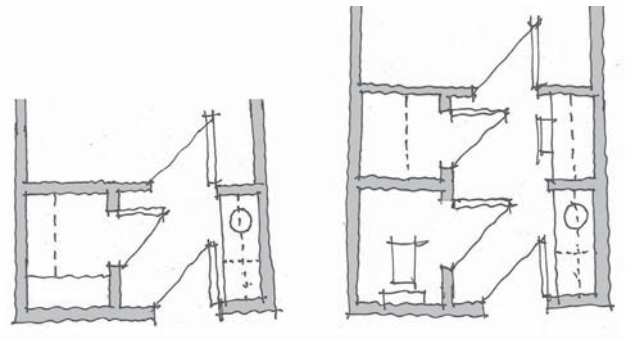

Figure 10: Two approaches to providing noise-buffering vestibules in private rooms along a double-loaded corridor. Both approaches could be accommodated in buildings with depths similar to the CCR and the West and in rooms with 150 to 200 square feet of floor area.

Small Common Kitchens

Replacing large but underused basement kitchens with smaller common kitchens on each residential floor would be beneficial. In the CCR, just 33 percent of residents use the kitchen daily; another 35 percent said that they would use the kitchen if it were not in the basement. This data suggests that there would be enough usage to warrant the existence of small common kitchens on each floor. Since kitchens are social spaces, their location on the residential floors could create semi-public gathering places, which were largely missing from the case study buildings. Further study is needed to determine the appropriate balance between in-room kitchenettes and small common kitchens.

Bathroom Suites

A full bathroom in every room is the most dignified solution. However, with pressures on space and budget, SRO developers should at a minimum provide each floor with a suite of bathrooms with one full bathroom per eight rooms (a ratio confirmed by the research) located toward the middle of the floor to minimize the distance from each room. For one resident, the best thing about his unit was its location directly across from the bathroom. Each bathroom should have a shower, sink, and toilet, as well as a shelf and towel hooks (figure 11). At least one of the private bathrooms should be handicap accessible with either a roll-in shower or tub.

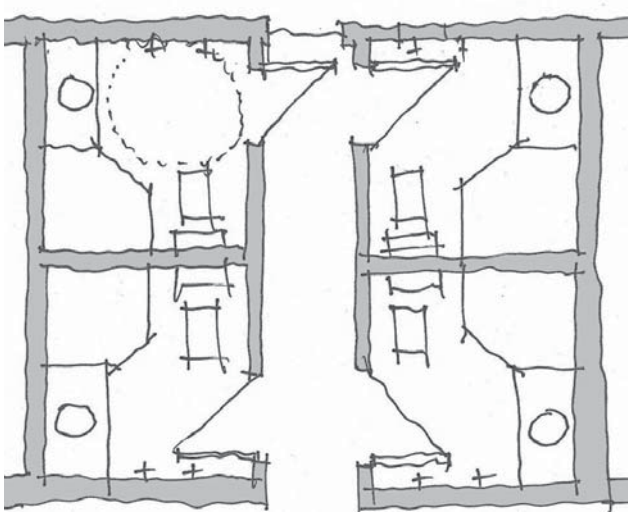

Figure 11: A suite of private bathrooms can solve personal safety and privacy concerns in an area slightly larger than the existing shared bathrooms at the CCR.

Conclusion

Given the similarities in resident demographics, funding constraints that dictate minimal room sizes, and the need for providing dignified living arrangements, the results of this study are applicable to SROs across the country. Perhaps the most useful finding is that SRO units need not be very big. In fact, at just 150 to 200 square feet, individual rooms can function quite effectively with a small vestibule for a kitchenette and possibly a private toilet stall. These rooms should be near small common kitchens and bathroom suites that allow for private bathing.

This study also adds to evidence that the SRO housing type has value for its residents and the city as a whole. This housing type can support astonishing residential densities, and allow people with extremely limited financial resources to live within walking distance of their workplaces. Their tenants add considerably to the diversity of the city. Support services available in most SROs help residents move from homelessness to homes, from dependency to independence. This is an inclusive notion of sustainability – sustaining diverse communities, supporting personal growth and well being, and conserving natural resources.

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