Can the "Granny Flat" Make a Comeback?

BY SANDY SMITH | NEXT CITY | JULY 31, 2014

Having Grandma, Grandpa and the grandkids under one roof used to be a fairly common arrangement among American families before they went nuclear and moved to the suburbs in the years following World War II. (Even after that, one could find examples of the old model here and there. I recall how my mother's mother lived with one of her daughters in a bedroom of her Kansas City home until her death in 1971. While that worked for her, there are those, such as Saufan Fung of Philadelphia, who would prefer a living arrangement that affords more privacy than that. Fung shared her opinion for Next City's recent **street survey of Center City Philadelphia elders**.)

Now, thanks in part to the aftershocks of the Great Recession, the multigenerational living model is coming back. Whether it's young millennials moving back in with their parents after college in order to save money while launching their careers or Gen X adults seeking to make room for their boomer parents, people are increasingly demanding spaces that allow two or more generations to live independently together by putting a home within a home. (As Edward McClelland explores in Next City's *Forefront* feature, **"The All-Ages City,"** planners are also grappling with this shift from a citywide perspective.)

The multigenerational home has a long provenance, going back to the "granny flat" over the garage of a detached early-20th-century home or the "in-law suite" with its own entrance in that same home. Suburban developers have responded to the trend by offering products like **Lennar's "NextGen" home,** which contains a small "apartment" with its own separate entrance within the traditional single-house envelope.

Urbanites, however, have yet to find this option widely available to them. But architects are working on bringing it to them. Two examples from opposite coasts show how creative minds are adapting the

multigenerational model to their own cities' housing stock.

San Francisco architect Brandon Baunach began thinking about the subject when he and his wife decided to have a family. Baunach, whose work includes numerous apartment complexes for seniors, realized that even with a decent income, adding children to the mix became too much of a financial burden in that notoriously expensive city.

"We didn't want to spend $2,500 a month on child care for two children," says Baunach. "And our mom was living nearby. So we made a strategic decision. 'You take care of the kids, and we'll take care of you when the time comes.' And we decided to buy a house together in San Francisco."

That's when he ran into a wall. "We found there were only two options: Buy a duplex or buy a house with an in-law apartment. But until very recently, in-law units were illegal. And with duplexes, we would have had to evict everyone in the duplex in order to take it over — and in one instance, that involved a person with an oxygen tank.

"So even though we had a good budget, there was no product that would allow us a level of separation while also allowing for togetherness." Baunach ended up having to move across the Bay to Berkeley to get the living arrangement he wanted.

There's also a personal element to Philadelphia architect Laura Blau's effort to develop a rowhouse that can change as its owner's needs change. "I'm in my late 50s, and the house I live in now would not be suitable for me to age in place," she says.

This stems from two major flaws in the standard Philadelphia rowhouse: Its first floor is elevated above the street and its narrow width usually requires that living and sleeping spaces be on separate floors.

The solutions Blau's **BluPath Design** architectural firm and **BAR Architects**, where Baunach works, are developing are each rooted in their own cities' urban ecologies.

BluPath's "Transformer" house takes the standard rowhouse, doubles its width, and lowers its first floor a few feet. This makes possible the creation of an accessible street-floor apartment of about 30 by 50 feet — "a nice, comfortable living area for a couple," Blau said. The space is large enough to accommodate a one-bedroom apartment whose entrance is shared with the unit on the floors above. It also is designed so that an elevator can be added to connect the units by inserting the shaft in utility closets on each floor.

With the potential for anywhere from one to four units on the floors above, the house could also offer an opportunity for its owners to offset operating costs by renting out units until it's time for the owners to use them. Those costs, however, are also lower by design — the house is engineered to meet passive-house standards, which means its net energy consumption would be zero or as close to it as possible.

"It's a real Rubik's Cube," she says. "It takes a lot of thought to be able to have these multiple functions in a comfortable and low-cost-to-run building, which is another factor for people on fixed incomes. It's a big project, and interesting."

Baunach's idea takes the concept to the world of multifamily housing — apartments and condos — by borrowing from the world of hotel design: Create two units with a common shared space that can be accessed from either unit and doors that allow the two units to be used separately or together as the owner desires. In the hotel, that space is often a living room that turns the two units into a suite; in BAR's prototype, the common space is the laundry room both units share.

"It's incredibly basic," he explains — akin to purchasing a studio and a two-bedroom apartment together. It also offers a more family-friendly alternative to one of the hottest trends in affordable housing, one that would allow buyers or renters to remain in the neighborhoods they love.

"What's popular in 'affordable by design' housing now is the micro-apartment," he says. "But micro-units don't work for families."

There is another challenge to bringing these designs about, however: changing local zoning laws to allow for their existence.

"Planning departments hate this because they see it as overcrowding," Baunach notes of his design. "But it's no more dense than micro-units."

Similarly, Blau's house couldn't be built in many Philadelphia neighborhoods, where the most common residential zoning category stipulates single-family rowhouses. "To really make this work, you have to have multifamily zoning from the get-go — you can't start as one thing then go back and fight for the zoning later on," she says.

"Because everyone is in the 'how things are at the moment' thinking and not thinking about how things are going to be, getting these zoning changes will be difficult," she adds. "I think we need to have more flexibility in the city now to accommodate future uses."

Blau is currently seeking investors to allow her to continue development of her concept.

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Resilient Cities

Dakar's Unhealthy Obsession With the French Baguette

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You can buy them everywhere: at your corner shop, the supermarket and the new, glitzy coffee places that have sprung up in parts of the city where the wealthy push their prams. We are talking, of course, about *la baguette*, the bread the French left behind in all of their former West African colonies. Sometimes it's breakfast, with a thin layer of mashed sardines, or it's an elaborate sandwich filled with meat, tomatoes and a generous helping of chili pepper.

The problem for people who don't have a lot of money – and in Dakar, that is the majority – is that baguettes don't come cheap. The reason is because they are made from imported wheat. There are alternatives available, but they do not sell.

There are other types of bread available in Dakar. The first time I became acquainted with what is known as *mburu ndougoub*, bread produced from a locally grown millet variety, I was elated. "Why doesn't everyone eat this?" I asked the baker. "Habit," he speculated. "But also, as you can see, this bread is even more expensive than these baguettes."

Mind-boggling: locally produced bread is more expensive than the imported stuff? But the reason is simple – it's all about economies of scale. The many mills that turn the imported wheat into flour (a lot of them are still French-owned) say they don't have the technical wherewithal to process the millet from Senegalese soil. The equipment is old, and buying new machines is beyond the budget of almost everyone, especially in these lean times. There's also a lingering suspicion that they don't want to change.

But residents still want bread at an affordable price. So what's to be done? Enter the people's solution to the bread problem: *tapalapa*. Made from locally grown cereal and transported from Dakar's outskirts into the big city, *tapalapa* is made in small, informal bakeries dotted all over the city's poorer suburbs. The bread is sturdy and quite hard, but tasty and, most important of all, cheap. The bakeries use ovens made of clay, like they do in the village, and they are flourishing.

The authorities have tried to rein in these bakeries. A lot of them aren't clean, and since the mixing and kneading of the dough is done by hand, this poses a problem. But instead of this being a handicap, the *tapalapa* bakers consider the issue of hygiene an incentive to weed out the competition. As one explained to me, "Yes, we do get visits from time to time from government officials who work for public hygiene. They turn the bakery upside down in search for things that are not right, but I can tell you that we never have any problems with them." He added ominously: "Unlike those other bakers, who are, quite frankly, working in a very unhealthy way." There is of course no way to verify his claims, but

the fact remains that Dakar has never had a major health scare emanating from *tapalapa*. Had there been one, the nation would have certainly known about it through Dakar's incurably sensational media.

With the arrival of so many people from the interior and from troubled neighboring countries – Guinea, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau – keeping close to four million Dakarois fed on a daily basis was always going to be challenge. The *tapalapa* revolution is a solution, but not everyone considers it a durable one. A former advisor to president Macky Sall puts the problem into perspective. "It's a question of mentality. We still live with the idea that whatever gets imported, especially from Europe, is of better quality. That is not true, but we just cannot get rid of that colonial mindset." Case in point: when you ask people what they would eat if they could afford it, they do not mention *mburu ndougoub*. No – it's back to *la baguette*, and no amount of arguing is going to change Dakar's love affair with the French loaf any time soon.

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TAGS: RESILIENT CITIES, FOOD, DAKAR, SENEGAL, COLONIALISM