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## Matt Bohannon and B.J. Rudell: Micro Units for Today's Urban Student

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In large cities across the country, space is often at a premium while costs of living continue to rise. The urban college campus is no exception. In their push to attract and retain the best and brightest students, many urban schools must carefully weigh how to house them, as well as what students are willing to pay.

When the University of California, San Diego faces this conundrum, they collaborate internally and externally to sort things out. Most recently, in 2014, the school developed a detailed program for a residential community to be comprised of “micro units.” These micro units are

275-square-foot, single-occupancy apartments for graduate and professional students. This no-frills concept appeals to students who view housing more as a place eat and sleep than a quality-of-life booster. Graduate and professional students spend most of their days in class or studying, which means housing is oftentimes less

critical to their overall educational experience. Micro units must be appealing to be successful, and in this case, the appeal can be found in three factors.

First, there's price. Many of today's graduate and professional students are seeking ways to lower expenses. This need is elevated in communities where a dollar doesn't go very far. Micro units provide more affordable options to those who are seeking to pay less for less space. Quite simply, these streamlined spaces are satisfying a market need for the cost conscious to whom 21<sup>st</sup> century residential amenities are expendable luxuries.

Second, there's functionality. UC San Diego isn't merely constructing 850-boxed units of 16' by 17' each. It's developing rooms that maximize the use of every square foot. Apartments were programmed to include a pull-down bed, a living space, a full bathroom, and kitchen amenities consisting of a two-burner stove and a sink equipped with a garbage disposal. Every detail was considered, including incorporating a full refrigerator in the final specs. The fact is, many students don't have time to shop for groceries regularly, and they won't want to absorb the cost of eating out regularly. A large refrigerator that can be stocked for two or more weeks at a time is a major draw for today's busy and economical on- and off-campus dwellers.

Third, there's simplicity. Some graduate and professional students don't want to be burdened with the need to fill up their apartment with "stuff." Give students the basics in a 275-square-foot layout, and they won't have the desire (or space) to lug 1,000 pounds of belongings up four flights of stairs at their move-in.

As with any housing concept, micro units are not for everyone. For example, storage is at a premium when minimalism is prioritized. UC San Diego's program included some creative solutions using cabinets, as well as an indoor bike storage area. But there's only so much wiggle room given the space limitations.

Overall, well-programmed and market-responsive micro units can be compelling solutions for urban graduate and professional students. At UC San Diego, the experiment will begin in 2017 with the opening of the \$170 million Mesa Nueva apartments. In addition to the micro units, the complex will feature 230 standard apartments primarily for faculty and staff and will be situated alongside an 890-space parking garage.

The industry is beginning to take a closer look at micro units, which some believe are "win-wins" for urban campuses and their students. It's about giving students what they want in a way that aligns with an institution's mission and financial goals. Their success will be assured when schools and their students can celebrate greater

financial flexibility without sacrificing quality of life.

And that, after all, is one of the keys to recruiting the best and brightest students.

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