



PROPERTY LINES

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Why do all new apartment buildings look the same?

The bland, boxy apartment boom is a design issue, and a housing policy problem

By **Patrick Sisson** | Dec 4, 2018, 12:34pm EST



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Property Lines is a column by Curbed senior reporter Patrick Sisson that spotlights real estate trends and hot housing markets across the country.

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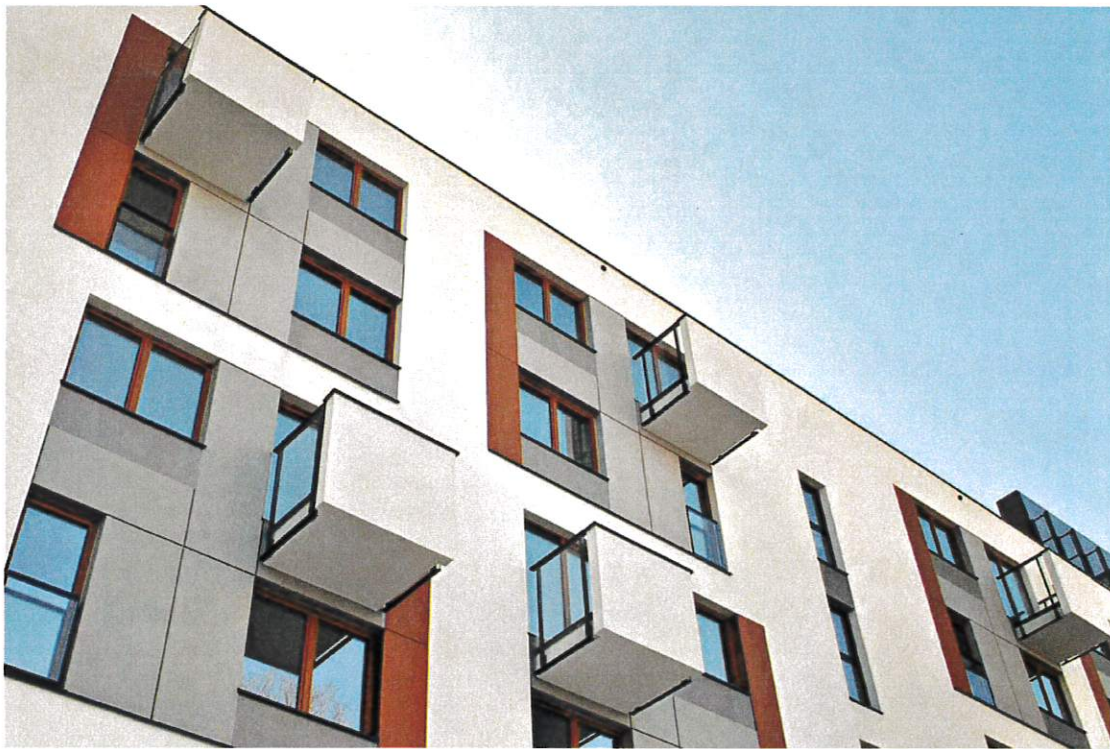
A wave of sameness has washed over new residential architecture. U.S. cities are filled with apartment buildings sporting boxy designs and somewhat bland facades, often made with colored panels and flat windows.

Due to an [Amazon-fueled apartment construction boom](#) over the last decade, Seattle has been an epicenter of this new school of structural simulacra. But Seattle is not alone.

Nearly every city, from [Charlotte](#) to [Minneapolis](#), has seen a proliferation of homogenous apartments as construction has increased again in the wake of the financial recession.

A [Twitter query seeking to name this ubiquitous style](#) was a goldmine. Some suggestions seemed inspired by the uniformity of design in computer programs and games: Simcityism, SketchUp contemporary, Minecraftsman, or Revititecture. Some took potshots at the way these buildings looked value-engineered to maximize profit: Developer modern, McUrbanism, or [fast-casual architecture](#). Then there are the aesthetic judgement calls: contemporary contempt, blandmarks, LoMo (low modern), and Spongebuild Squareparts.

“Part of what people are responding to isn’t the building themselves, it’s that there are so many of them going up so quickly, all in the same places in the city,” says Richard Mohler, an associate professor of architecture at the University of Washington.



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Many of the replies to the Twitter call simply pointed out that these buildings are housing, and much-needed housing at that. Though they can be defined or classified by aesthetics, this wave of new apartments is perhaps best described as a symbol of today's

housing problems: a lack of developable land; rising land, material, and labor costs; and an acute need to find more affordable places for people to live.

“At the end of the day, if you line up multifamily apartments from Boston, San Francisco, and Miami that have been built in the last decade, you’re going to see a very strong pattern,” says Scott Black, senior vice president of Bristol Development, a Nashville-based firm that develops apartments across the Southeast.

Good architecture should always respond to the local context. In the case of these buildings, the local economic context just happens to be the same in just about every major U.S. city.

“Critics don’t understand what we’re working with, the parameters and the financial constraints,” says Black. “It’s like any other business: If you’re selling autos or selling widgets, there are certain costs, and a certain profit you need to make to do business in the future.”



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It boils down to code, costs, and craft

Perhaps the biggest constraint in the urban U.S. apartment market, a \$61 billion annual industry, is the amount of available space. Many cities zone with an overwhelming preference for detached, single-family homes, with small corridors in downtowns or dense areas set aside for large, multistory towers. In Seattle, for instance, roughly three-quarters of residential land is zoned for single-family homes. That means new apartments are forced to cluster in small areas of the city, amplifying the impact of a rash of new, similar buildings.

The buildings themselves are an effort to fit within the small niches made available by local building and zoning codes. According to Mohler, due to height limits and safety/fire requirements, most of these structures are what's known as "5 over 1" or "one-plus-five": wood-framed construction, which contain apartments and is known as Type 5 in the International Building Code, over a concrete base, which usually contains retail or commercial space, or parking structures, known as Type 1. Some codes also mandate a modulated facade, or varying exteriors across adjacent buildings to avoid repetition.

Cities' design review boards can add to the pressures caused by zoning. Ideally, these groups work with architects and developers to improve upcoming buildings and make them more compatible with the neighborhood. Mohler says that's not always the case; in some cities, there's a tendency to rubber-stamp structures that have already proven themselves, leading to a formulaic feel.

Code constraints, which allow construction on restricted areas, help create the second major restraint: cost. The reason our cities are filled with so much of the same kind of building is because it's the cheapest way to build an apartment. In this case, that's light-frame wood construction, which often uses flat windows that are easy to install; a process called rainscreen cladding to create the skin of the building; as well as Hardie panels, a facade covering made from fiber cement.

The need to cut costs limits facade options, says Black. Hardie Panels run roughly \$16 a square foot, roughly the same cost as brick. The next upgrade, metal siding, costs from \$25 to \$50 a square foot, potentially more than triple the cost.

"Since we're facing a housing affordability crisis, it makes a certain amount of sense to build a building as affordably as we can," says Mohler.

According to Black, variation is costly. Many units get made to a standard size, say 12-foot-wide bedrooms. Repeat that a few times per floor, maximized to create rentable space, and you start a domino effect toward generic architecture, because the floor plates end up very similar. Once the interior is laid out, there are ways to make the exterior look more interesting using setbacks, materials, and massing. But giving up space for units and creating more complicated construction plans cuts into profitability.

“The bigger issue is construction costs have escalated pretty significantly over the last two years,” says Black. “We need to deliver a product within a price point. People don’t always understand the margins we work with. We really do want to build something that’ll sparkle and shine and look great from the outside. At the end of the day, we feel like we’re able to do that.”

Some critics dismiss the cost issue as a small piece of a larger problem. Michael Paglia, a writer for *Westword* in Denver, penned a popular piece about his city’s rash of bad design, “[Denver is Drowning in Awful Architecture](#).” He feels architects aren’t just cost-constrained, but are being left out of the equation. Computer-aided design has led to a degradation of the role of architect, Paglia argued, replacing a noble craft with a series of equations that wring every last bit of value out of a site, aesthetics be damned. Formulaic floorplans are cost effective, while good design is considered an [unaffordable luxury](#), concentrated, like so much else, among the 1 percent.

“I don’t think you can call the designers of these buildings designers or architects,” he told Curbed. “I think accountants are designing these buildings.”

The art of design has become a science, he says, and that’s created another important, but less tangible, constraint on new construction—the loss of construction craft. Paglia feels that construction standards, and the expectations renters have of new buildings, have diminished.

“Many of the renters living in those buildings don’t even know they’re terrible,” he says. “And as far as cost constraints go, talk to someone in Florence, Italy, where there are numerous constraints on development. Nothing is an excuse for bad design.”

Mohler agrees that there are tangible difference between the apartments of today and yesteryear. Older apartment buildings have something that the Hardie-clad structures

lack, a certain texture and materiality.

“Today’s flat window may be a great product, easy to install and cost-effective,” he says. “But the depth of facade on older buildings offers a whole new level of detail and scale.”



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History judges architecture on a curve

Since the constraints creating the conditions for this generic apartment architecture show little sign of abating, cities may be stuck with buildings like these for the foreseeable future. New construction slowed this year after peaking in 2017, but that still means 283,000 new apartments are expected to be finished by the end of the year, many in this generic style. What happens to them further down the road, decades and generations from now?

“I don’t think these buildings will be around in 40 years. They’ll collapse and be maintenance problems,” says Paglia. “We’ll remember the small sliver of good architecture being built today.”

Mohler, though, thinks time will play a trick on detractors of today’s bland, boxy buildings. He points to neighborhoods of identical bungalows, celebrated and often

enshrined as historic districts. At the time they were built, in the early half of the 20th century, they weren't the product of forward-thinking architects seeking to create character-filled dwellings for today's homeowners to drool over. They were factoring in cost, code, and craft, and creating their own equations to maximize profit and product. Placing them above today's building, often meant to meet contemporary needs for affordable housing, can be, as McMansion Hell's Kate Wagner wrote, a form of "aesthetic moralism."

"Many of these houses were the same, and many were completely identical to each other because they were being built by a single developer," Mohler says of past urban developments. "At the time, it was criticized for wasting land and all looking the same. Looking identical today means neighborhood character. If it's old and looks the same, it's good, but if it's new and all looks the same, it's bad."

Even Mohler doesn't say these boxy builds will be celebrated in coming decades. But, arising from an era with an acute housing shortage, perhaps they'll have kitsch appeal, or be appreciated for what they represent: a part of the solution to today's housing crisis.

"I'm optimistic that people's opinions of these buildings will change over time," he says.

"Will they be celebrated? Not likely. But will they be more accepted? Probably."