

Eric Bunge, Adjunct Associate Professor, Studio Statement

UNIT(LESS) HOUSING

We measure housing and its residents in terms of units – 1 dwelling unit, 1 apartment, 1 condo, 1 family... multi-family, 1 household, 1 bedroom, 1 module, 1 parking spot per unit, etc. Then we add them up – or fit them together like puzzles - into the spatial and social matrices of housing projects. But at a time of rapid change in demographics, ownership models, construction delivery methods, and the way we live, work, share, and connect, the straightforward math of housing seems increasingly inadequate. Our studio section will therefore reconsider the assumed units of housing. With the aim of adapting living environments to actual and anticipated social and technological changes, we will revisit four interconnected notions of the unit, starting with the residents we are designing for.

Social Unit Who lives in housing? Who would live –healthily - in your housing design throughout the lifespan of your building? If increasingly diverse constellations of co-residents have increasing trouble adapting to a housing stock largely predicated on nuclear families, can we instead design for the way people actually live together – or apart? Beyond the social units of nuclear families, extended families, a single parent with children, roommates, or singles, etc, challenges of affordability and social changes are resulting in a progressively wider spectrum of occupants. Based on initial research early in the semester about demographic trends and some extrapolation/speculation, each student group will assume a set of users based on a social scenario. These social units will be your clients.

Programmatic Unit The US census bureau defines a housing unit as “a house, an apartment, a mobile home or trailer, a group of rooms, or a single room that is occupied... as separate living quarters”. As we increasingly share amenities, ranging from storage to recreation rooms, to shared kitchens, gardens and living areas, where are the real boundaries between housing units? A resident's daily movements may no longer be so clearly centered on their apartment, suggesting instead a dispersed house. And as we increasingly work from home, or share working spaces in residential buildings, the program of housing is becoming more heterogeneous. Based on the social unit(s) you have chosen to design for, and a reconsideration of the way we use and share amenities in apartment buildings, you will design dwelling spaces attuned to the fluidity and distribution of contemporary life.

Economic Unit In the United States, one's financial or legal options for securing a right to live in a housing unit are generally limited to either owning outright (~64%; 32% in New York City), renting, or subletting – a limited set of options, even if one includes access to subsidized affordable housing. Meanwhile, the way we pay for and relate to other aspects of our increasingly shared economy is changing – we share office space at co-working spaces like WeWorks, use Uber, Car-To-Go or Citi Bikes rather than rent or own cars or bikes to get around, etc. As one way to address the decreasing affordability of housing, its economic unit need no longer be constrained by antiquated models of ownership. In Berlin we will investigate firsthand the recent phenomenon of Baugruppen (German for “Building Groups”), a cohousing model in which an architect-led group of like-minded people or friends bypass developers to build their own building, according to their needs and budget. As a studio section we will assess this model of ownership, and test some of its ramifications through design.

Physical Unit Whether or not we build housing projects with standard or modular construction, at the site or in a factory, architects often conceive of the apartment unit as a constructive unit – an immutable physical object to be stacked like Lego – either conceptually or actually. This focus on the apartment as physical entity often arises out of the conflation of social, programmatic and constructive units: 1 family =1 housing unit =1 volume. We will question the role that this scale of physical unit plays as a conceptual model in the design of housing. Instead we will consider a broader range of scales as conceptual drivers, from smaller elements such as walls, columns, windows, stairs, closets, furniture or balconies, to the larger scale of building neighborhoods and building infrastructure.

Unit(Less)? Your goal will be to challenge the idea of the housing unit as we know it, leading to a new understanding of alignments between social, programmatic, economic and physical aspects of housing. We will likely still be working with units of some sort; perhaps these are inescapable and a fundamental aspect of housing. But as a studio we will identify or imagine new constellations of residents, new distributions of amenities and spaces, new forms of ownership, and new emphases on physical elements that result in a visionary new architecture for housing.