

## The Seattle Special: A US City’s Unique Approach to Small Infill Lots

*Sean Jursnick, AIA*

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Built in 1978 with a view of Seattle’s historic Pike Place Market, the Pike and Virginia Building (figure 1) initiated a housing style unique to US cities. Locally dubbed the Seattle Special, this type of housing is a multifamily dwelling built up to six stories in height, constructed with a small footprint on an urban lot, also known as an infill lot, and served by a single staircase.<sup>1</sup>

**FIGURE 1.** Pike and Virginia Building (1978), Olson Walker Architects



*Photograph courtesy of Andrew Van Leeuwen Photography*

The Pike and Virginia Building, the very first Seattle Special, is a narrow six-story condominium tower made possible by 1977 building-code amendments drafted at the recommendation of an advisory committee formed by Seattle’s Mayor Wes Uhlman, who sought to reverse the city’s population decline. The committee, known as the Building Code Advisory Board, was tasked with examining how the building code could be modified to “encourage in-city living, redevelopment, and new construction”<sup>2</sup> and recommended amendments to legalize taller single-stair housing within the city. The adoption of these unique amendments allowed the Pike and Virginia project to build more than a dozen units using a compact-footprint and slender-massing design that met strict urban-design guidelines. Though the amendments have evolved over the decades, they have maintained the original spirit that first encouraged the development of dense housing on small urban lots, and today the Seattle Special is a prolific building type used for new housing across the city.

In response to today’s housing crisis in the United States, politicians and housing advocates across the country have also turned their attention to building-code reform as a way to make housing more attainable.<sup>3</sup> The most commonly used model code in the United States, the International Building Code (IBC), mandates a three-story height limit, one of the most restrictive height limits in the world for single-stairway multifamily buildings.<sup>4</sup> The Seattle Special diverged from these model code requirements after experts in Seattle evaluated the impact that egress requirements were having on housing options in the city and created measures for taller single-stair housing of any construction type, including wood, steel, and concrete.

Typical IBC-compliant apartment buildings taller than three stories include double-loaded corridors, whereby a required central corridor bisects the building to provide access to multiple exits, resulting in a wide footprint. For single-stair housing, Seattle’s building code requires very short distances from units to exit stairs, resulting in highly efficient floor plates that dedicate a larger portion of the floor plan to living areas than typical double-loaded corridor housing floor plates do. Clustering units around a central stair creates a compact floor plate that fits on small lots, avoiding the substantial costs of assembling the parcels needed for larger buildings, and since Seattle’s code limits the number of units per floor to four, typical units have windows on multiple walls, providing a high quality of living.

With apartments ranging from 220-square-foot micro units to 2,000-square-foot multiple-bedroom, full-floor flats, Seattle’s collection of Seattle Specials boasts a diversity in housing that is missing from small-lot infill in cities across the United States. Seattle Special projects increase the housing supply by bringing dense housing to small lots and adding units across the housing spectrum, including affordable housing, market-rate apartments, student housing, and mixed-use luxury condominiums.

Currently, Seattle, Honolulu, and New York City are the only US cities that allow single-stair housing up to six stories in height. While New York City permits new single-stair buildings up to six

stories, it does so with more restrictions than Seattle and with a requirement for steel or concrete construction—a general rule for all construction throughout the city—and a floor area limit of only 2,000 square feet per story. Legislation to double this size limit was introduced in 2022, aligning New York City’s regulations more closely with Seattle’s. Also following Seattle’s lead, other US municipalities have passed—or are considering—legislation allowing taller single-stair housing. In 2012, Honolulu’s policymakers adopted building-code amendments copied verbatim from Seattle’s single-exit provisions, and in 2023 and 2024, multiple states passed legislation aimed at reforming means of egress rules around stairs in order to improve housing options.<sup>5</sup> Increased attention on these buildings led the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) to host a two-day Single-Exit Stair Symposium in September 2024 that brought together international fire-safety experts and advocates for and against taller single-stair buildings. The NFPA plans to publish a report that policymakers can use as a resource to understand fire and other safety considerations.

The gallery section of this policy brief showcases six categories of recently constructed projects made possible by Seattle’s unique building-code approach:

1. Market-rate apartments
2. Condominiums
3. Student housing
4. Affordable housing
5. Mixed-use housing
6. Cohousing

These compact buildings are located on height-zoned lots too small to accommodate the typical double-loaded corridor apartments. The examples, which have 4 to 29 units, demonstrate how building-code reform can transform small urban infill lots into the dense and vibrant developments referred to by housing experts as the “missing middle housing.”

Small lots are often overlooked for their ability to create urban density, and allowing the construction of mid-rise single-stair housing offers US cities the chance to support more housing types and create denser, more walkable communities in the existing urban fabric, whether in a historic district like Pike Place Market or an emerging neighborhood yet to make a name for itself.

## GALLERY OF SMALL INFILL LOTS

### 1. Market-rate apartments

#### ALNA Ballard



ALNA Ballard. Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.

This project is one of the few apartment buildings in Seattle's low-rise zoning and sits on a block consisting of single-family homes and three-story townhomes.

- Architect: b9 Architects
- Address: 1123 NW 57th Street
- Number of units: 21
- Lot size: 50' x 100' (5,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2022



## 1. Market-rate apartments *(continued)*

### Greenfire Campus Apartments



Left: The Greenfire campus. *Photograph courtesy of Johnston Architects.* Right: Resident common area. *Photograph courtesy of Lara Swimmer Photography.*

The Greenfire Campus Apartments complement a compact footprint with access to urban gardens and natural habitat.

- Architect: Johnston Architects
- Address: 2041 NW 57th Street
- Number of units: 18
- Lot size: Shared campus with retail building
- Year completed: 2013

## 1. Market-rate apartments (*continued*)

### Franklin Station



Franklin Station. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

Franklin Station features a shared roof deck and includes a mix of micro and two-bed units on a small corner lot.

- Architect: Diepenbrock Architects
- Address: 2303 Franklin Avenue East
- Number of units: 22
- Lot size: 60' x 80' (4,800 square feet)
- Year completed: 2019



## 1. Market-rate apartments (*continued*)

### Sola16



Left: Sola16. *Photograph courtesy of Schemata Workshop.* Right: Sola16, interior. *Photograph courtesy of William Wright Photography.*

Sola16 replaced a single-family home with eight family-sized two-bed units. A central circulation core containing a stair, elevator, and corridor separates units, so neighbors do not share unit walls.

- Architect: Schemata Workshop
- Address: 2351 Franklin Avenue East
- Number of units: 8
- Lot size: 60' x 90' (3,600 square feet)
- Year completed: 2016

## 1. Market-rate apartments (*continued*)

### 602 Flats



602 Flats. Photograph courtesy of BUILD LLC.

602 Flats consists of four full-floor units, so each apartment has access to natural light and ventilation on all four sides.

- Architect: BUILD LLC
- Address: 602 12th Avenue E
- Number of units: 4
- Lot size: 40' x 65' (2,600 square feet)
- Year completed: 2018



## 1. Market-rate apartments (*continued*)

### Sylvan Court



Sylvan Court. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

Following a change to local parking requirements, Sylvan Court replaced a surface parking lot with 20 units of housing in a four-story addition to an existing three-story apartment.

- Architect: Neiman Taber Architects
- Address: 1901 E Fir Street
- Number of units: 20
- Lot size: 30' x 130' (3,900 square feet)
- Year completed: 2021

## 1. Market-rate apartments *(continued)*

### Jansen Court



Left: Jansen Court. Right: Jansen Court, interior. *Photographs courtesy of CAST architecture.*

On a very narrow lot, the Jansen Court apartments were constructed in the side yard of an existing century-old home.

- Architect: CAST architecture
- Address: 2010 East Jansen Court
- Number of units: 10
- Lot size: 30' x 120' (3,600 square feet)
- Year completed: 2022



## 1. Market-rate apartments *(continued)*

### Juniper Flats



Juniper Flats. *Photograph courtesy of BUILD LLC.*

Juniper Flats is a 12-unit apartment building that maximizes the potential of a small lot while maintaining a scale that is relatable to adjacent single-family residences.

- Architect: BUILD LLC
- Address: 6547 24th Avenue NW
- Number of units: 12
- Lot size: 50' x 102' (5,100 square feet)
- Year completed: 2024

## 1. Market-rate apartments (*continued*)

### Fremont View



Fremont View. Photograph courtesy of BUILD LLC.

Completed in the fall of 2024, the 29-unit Fremont View Apartments is located on a steep hillside and shares a lot with an existing multistory apartment building. To navigate the change in terrain, the narrow seven-story project was designed as two stacked single-stair conditions with the bottom three floors served by an elevator and a single, enclosed stair that exits at street level on the south side of the building. The top four floors are served by a separate, open stair that exits at the top of the hill on the north side of the building.

- Architect: BUILD LLC
- Address: 519 N. Bowdoin Place
- Number of units: 29
- Lot size: 80' x 120' (9,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2024



## 2. Condominiums

### Dexter Condominiums



Dexter Condominiums. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The four-story Dexter sits on an urban lot zoned with a 40-foot height limit that overlooks Seattle's Lake Union. The project contains eight luxury condominiums, each with windows on three sides.

- Architect: Johnston Architects
- Address: 2514 Dexter Avenue North
- Number of units: 8
- Lot size: 90' x 100' (9,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2024

## 2. Condominiums *(continued)*

### Two Ten Comstock



Two Ten Comstock. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

Neighboring both a single-family home and six-story, 40-unit apartment building, Two Ten Comstock provides a much-needed housing type in Seattle: urban condominiums.

- Architect: Prentice Balance Wickline Architects
- Address: 210 W Comstock Street
- Number of units: 8
- Lot size: 60' x 110' (5,700 square feet)
- Year completed: 2018



## 2. Condominiums *(continued)*

### East Union Lofts



Left: East Union Lofts. *Photograph courtesy of James F. Housel and Miller Hull.* Right: East Union Lofts, interior. *Photograph by author.*

Seattle's East Union Lofts activates a narrow lot with full-depth units. Residents enjoy full-height windows on the front and rear of the building that allow for easy cross ventilation. The project's raw and disciplined design earned recognition with awards from AIA Seattle, AIA Washington, and AIA NW & Pacific Region.

- Architect: Miller Hull
- Address: 1310 East Union
- Number of units: 8
- Lot size: 40' x 80' (3,200 square. feet)
- Year completed: 2001

## 2. Condominiums *(continued)*

### The Fitzgerald



The Fitzgerald. *Photograph courtesy of Steve Snider/Real Residential.*

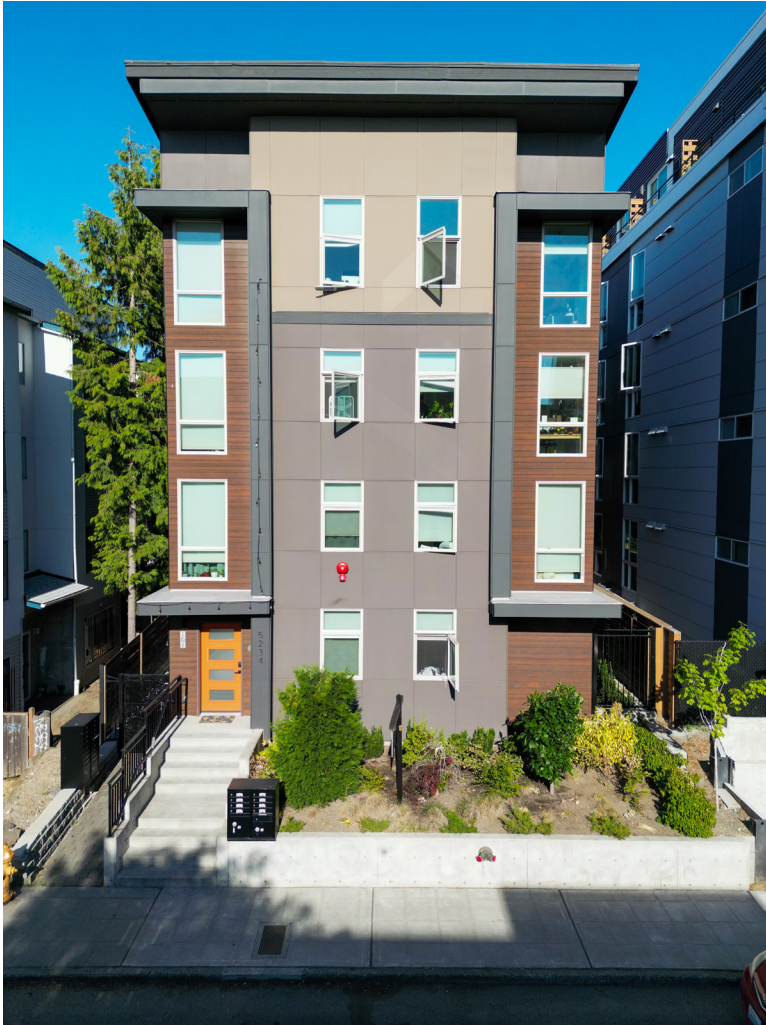
The Fitzgerald contains large three-bedroom condominium units with abundant daylight from windows and multiples sides on an unusual L-shaped lot.

- Architect: Johnston Architects
- Address: 1406 3rd Avenue West
- Number of units: 13
- Lot size: L-shaped (9,300 square feet)
- Year completed: 2023



### 3. Student housing

#### 15th Avenue Apartments



15th Avenue Apartments. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The 15th Avenue Apartments feature eight large three- and four-bed units for college students on a narrow lot in Seattle's walkable U District.

- Architect: Novion Group
- Address: 5234 15th Avenue NE
- Number of units: 8
- Lot size: 40' x 110' (4,400 square feet)
- Year completed: 2016

### 3. Student housing *(continued)*

#### University Flats



University Flats. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The University Flats building provides a range of unit types, from micro to two-bedroom units, with excellent daylight and views.

- Architect: Neiman Taber Architects
- Address: 5521 15th Avenue NE
- Number of units: 18
- Lot size: 40' x 100' (4,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2020



### 3. Student housing *(continued)*

#### The Willet



The Willet. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The Willet uses a compact and efficient floor plate. It replaced a single-family home with 18 units on a narrow lot within walking distance of the University of Washington campus.

- Architect: Ryan Rhodes Designs
- Address: 4252 8th Avenue NE
- Number of units: 18
- Lot size: 40' x 100' (4,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2017

## 4. Affordable housing

### Capitol View



Capitol View. *Photograph courtesy of Habitat for Humanity Seattle-King & Kittitas Counties.*

This five-story affordable condominium building expanded Habitat for Humanity’s project-type portfolio and creates affordable home ownership opportunities for Seattle residents.

- Architect: JW Architects
- Address: 410 11th Avenue East
- Number of units: 13
- Lot size: 40' x 100' (4,000 square feet)
- Year completed: 2023



#### 4. Affordable housing *(continued)*

##### Aurora Avenue Apartments



Aurora Avenue Apartments. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The project on Aurora Avenue sits on a narrow 30-foot wide lot and replaced a single-family home with a collection of units that have cross-ventilation. All upper-level units include balconies.

- Architect: Jerry Jutting Architect
- Address: 3833 Aurora Avenue N
- Number of units: 13
- Lot size: 30' x 80' (2,400 square feet)
- Year completed: 2017

## 5. Mixed-use housing

### 101 John Street



101 John Street. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

Only blocks from the Space Needle, the 101 John Street Apartments are a long, narrow bar that contains four large street-facing units per floor and a circulation core on the rear. Activating the ground floor are a deli and salon.

- Architect: Kilburn Architects
- Address: 101 John Street
- Number of units: 20
- Lot size: 40' x 115' (4,600 square feet)
- Year completed: 2016



## 5. Mixed-use housing *(continued)*

### BB House



BB House. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The BB House apartments were constructed as part of a renovation and addition to a century-old retail building and create a new mixed-use project.

- Architect: PUBLIC47 Architects
- Address: 1208 E Remington Court
- Number of units: 22
- Lot size: 80' x 90' (13,600 square feet)
- Year completed: 2024

## 5. Mixed-use housing *(continued)*

### Park Modern



Left: Park Modern. *Photograph courtesy of BUILD LLC.* Right: Park Modern, apartment entryway. *Photograph courtesy of Chase Jarvis/BUILD LLC.*

Designed, developed, and built by BUILD LLC, the mixed-use Park Modern boasts a large floor plate and provides 12 full-depth condominiums atop three ground-floor commercial spaces and below-grade parking.

- Architect: BUILD LLC
- Address: 5611 University Way NE
- Number of units: 12
- Lot size: 75' x 90' (6,750 square feet)
- Year completed: 2007



## 5. Mixed-use housing *(continued)*

### Admiral Mixed-Use



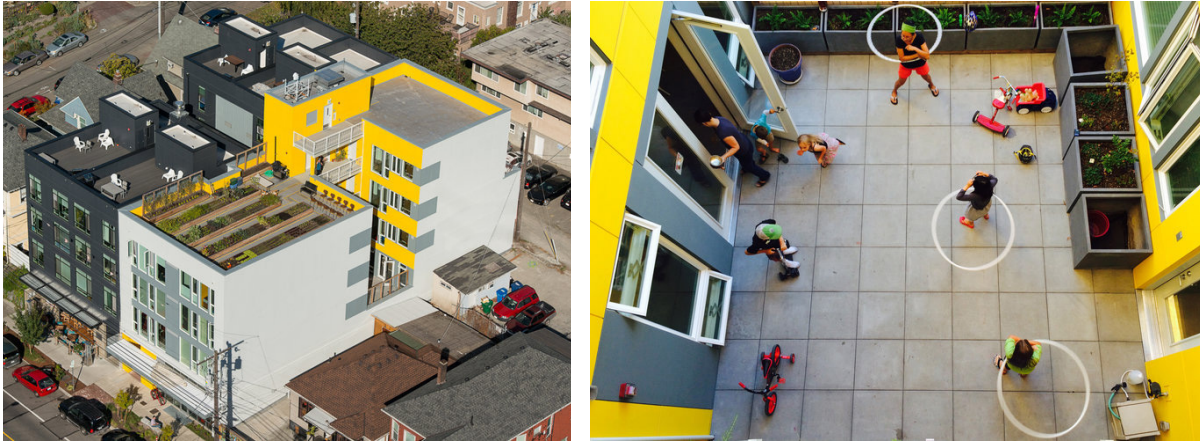
Admiral Mixed-Use. *Photograph by Alex Hart Photography.*

The Admiral Mixed-Use project contains four condominiums per floor, each with access to a balcony and windows on multiple sides. The ground floor contains tuck-under parking and childcare.

- Architect: NK Architects
- Address: 2310 California Avenue SW
- Number of units: 12
- Lot size: 50' x 123' (6,150 square feet)
- Year completed: 2020

## 6. Cohousing

### Capitol Hill Urban Cohousing (CHUC)



Left: Capitol Hill Urban Cohousing (CHUC). Right: CHUC, courtyard. *Photographs courtesy of Schemata Workshop/William Wright Photography.*

CHUC is one of the most innovative urban housing projects in the United States. The cohousing project was designed and developed by the residents and uses a five-story single-stair design to provide nine units of housing facing a central courtyard.

- Architect: Schemata Workshop
- Address: 1720 12th Avenue E
- Number of units: 9
- Lot size: 40' x 110' (4,400 square feet)
- Year completed: 2016



## About the Author

Sean Jursnick, AIA, is a licensed architect in Colorado with a keen interest in research and housing advocacy. Jursnick moderated a panel on the single-stair reform movement at the 2024 AIA Conference on Architecture and Design, and as an Emergent Ventures grant recipient, he organized an international single-stair design contest. Jursnick also serves as the cochair of the AIA Colorado Housing Committee and was awarded the AIA Colorado Fisher Travel Scholarship to study carbon reduction efforts in smart cities.

## Notes

1. *2018 Seattle Building Code*, Chapter 10, Section 1006.3.3, Single Exits, <http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/SeattleBuildingCode/2018SBCCchapter10.pdf>.
2. Donald C. Haas, (Seattle) Building Code Advisory Board Minutes, January 24, 1973.
3. Eduardo Mendoza and Stephen Smith, "Point Access Block Building Design: Options for Building More Single-Stair Apartment Buildings in North America," *HUD CityScape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 26, no. 1 (2024): 431–47.
4. Alex Armlovich, "Exit Strategy: The Case for Single-Stair Egress," *Architectural Record*, May 9, 2024; Conrad Speckert, Second Egress: Building a Code Change (website), accessed September 2, 2024, <https://secondegress.ca/Jurisdictions>.
5. Center for Building in North America, "Single-Stair Reform Efforts Across North America," accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.centerforbuilding.org/singlestair-tracker>.