

## Living Small Is the Best Revenge



Despite less-than-rhapsodic memories of miniaturized apartment living, the married architects Mimi Hoang and Eric Bunge designed the winner of the adAPT micro-unit competition sponsored by the [New York City](#) Housing and Preservation Department and endorsed by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg.

Their entry, “My Micro NY,” features 55 prefabricated apartments, of 360 square feet or less, stacked in a 10-story building on East 27th Street in Kips Bay. The building does not stint on amenities, providing a common terrace, a laundry room and a bike room.

The couple’s firm, [nArchitects](#), is based in a Dumbo loft, and they live in a Carroll Gardens town house, but for the competition they drew on their cohabitation in a tenement in Lower [Manhattan](#).

The mission was to seize an opportunity to render a tight space habitable and, if possible, aesthetically pleasing.

“At first blush we weren’t so sure about entering,” Mr. Bunge said, “because we felt people should have more space than this. But that was before we understood that the alternatives out there are far worse. There are people living together in substandard

apartments all over the city who would prefer to live alone but can't afford to. So we said, 'Wait a minute, let's make a humane small space where people would want to live.' "

The architects say the design is flexible and transferable to virtually any neighborhood or borough.

"This is a pilot program, and it doesn't mean micro-units are going to be sprouting everywhere," Ms. Hoang said. "But it's incredibly exciting to be part of a progressive new residential prototype for New York that has social implications and is intended to help solve a social problem.

"This is not a return to tenement or S.R.O.-style living," she added. "There are amenities and a very social dimension to the design."

The target tenants are singles, who constitute nearly a third of the city's households, and couples with a limited income. Forty percent of the units are designated as affordable housing, with rents that start at \$914 a month and top out at \$1,873.

And no, combination units are not on the horizon: "One of our friends, an artist, told us he wanted to buy three of the units and combine them," Mr. Bunge said, "and after we got done laughing, we told him first of all, these are rentals, and second, combining them would totally defeat the entire purpose."

The objective of the [contest](#), undertaken by 33 design teams (nArchitects partnered with Monadnock Development and the Actors Fund Housing Development Corporation), was to design affordable, appealing apartments in the 250- to 350- square-foot range. Construction on the \$15 million building, envisioned by the architects in four shades of gray brick, will start by the end of the year.

The units the couple designed for "My Micro NY" are being built at a factory in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The layouts vary (though the kitchens and baths are identical), but all offer several surprising features: a nine-foot-high sliding glass door that opens onto a Juliet balcony, ceilings nearly 10 feet in height, a full closet and 16 linear feet of built-in overhead storage.

"They're going to be miles better than the apartment we used to live in," Mr. Bunge said.

Nick Lembo, the president of Monadnock, recruited nArchitects for the competition. “Some architects shy away from modular construction, and some are intimidated by micro-units,” he said. “But Mimi and Eric were excited by the creative challenges. They created an incredibly space-efficient unit with an open design that will make it feel larger than its square footage.”

As Ms. Hoang put it: “We imagined a building that could become a New York housing model — make a big impact with small rooms. The repercussions on the housing market could be broad, and that’s thrilling for us. Not lucrative, but thrilling.”

Ms. Hoang, 41, and Mr. Bunge, 45, are thin people, of average height and not overly fond of furniture — they are capable, in other words, of functioning in a relatively small residential footprint — but they recall their five years in a 350-square-foot hovel in the East Village with minimal nostalgia.

It was the sort of place, Mr. Bunge said, where you morphed your body into a pretzel to negotiate the splinter of space separating the bathroom sink from the toilet and the door. A dungeonlike ambience closed in like an unwanted embrace the moment one entered the building, and it failed to improve inside the three remarkably paltry rooms, which cost them \$1,200 a month.

“It had absolutely no amenities,” Ms. Hoang recalled, “except for the neighborhood and the fact that it was rent-controlled.”

But they were recent newlyweds (married in 1998), and they made a mutual decision to leave their 1,400-square-foot rental loft in Boston. Both had received master’s degrees in architecture from Harvard, and their goal was to get jobs, save money and establish their own firm. So the price was right, even if the tenement was a downer. With no room for their books, they stashed them in a rented storage unit in [Brooklyn](#).

By 1999 they had started nArchitects, which today employs 11 people. In 2004 they won the Museum of Modern Art’s [Young Architects Program](#) with “Canopy,” a felicitous and sinuous outdoor installation of green bamboo on MoMA’s P.S. 1 campus in Long Island City.

They landed their first residential project, the seven-story Switch Building at 109 Norfolk Street, in late 2004 and completed it in 2007. Here, they designed four 1,400-square-foot floor-through apartments, a 2,000-square-foot penthouse, and a ground-floor art

gallery.

Barry Bergdoll, the chief curator of architecture and design at MoMA, was on a committee that reviewed the entries for the adAPT competition, which were submitted without names attached. The winner was announced in late January.

“Theirs was by far my favorite,” he said, “so it was a pleasant surprise when I found the winning entry was Mimi and Eric’s, because we’ve been watching their progress ever since 2004. It is so astutely and sensitively thought out, with a maximization of storage potential in a minimal space; it really looks like how a person might actually live.”

For the New York City Parks and Recreation Department, they designed the Wyckoff House Museum, a 5,000-square-foot education complex destined for Wyckoff Park in East Flatbush, Brooklyn. On the commercial side, they just completed the redesign and expansion of the retail landmark in Beirut, Lebanon, known as ABC Mall, for which they created a laser-cut aluminum facade. They are also on the team headed by [James Corner Field Operations](#) (landscape architect for the High Line) that won the competition for an \$85 million redesign of Chicago’s [Navy Pier](#).

“They are members of a new and conscientious generation of architects and they are definitely a firm to watch,” said the architect Robert A. M. Stern, the dean of the Yale School of Architecture, where Ms. Hoang teaches design. “It’s not about making pretty pictures. It’s about design integrity and the ability to articulate ideas and make them livable to real people.”

About the micro-units and the Switch Building, with its bay-window motif, Mr. Stern said, “It’s what I would call smart design.”

Their most recent residential renovation is their house in Brooklyn, a 1901 structure they transformed from a three-unit rental to a 2,100-square-foot single-family residence for themselves and their two sons.

They still don’t have much furniture, but their entire book collection fits right in.