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'Urban Campus' Housing: The Dorms Of The 21st Century?



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Arizona State University's campus in downtown Phoenix

The college experience in America is generally confined to quasi-remote campuses. Even when prominent academic institutions are the key assets within their small cities and towns, many of them remain insulated, replete with vast lawns and grandiose, distant buildings. But with time, higher education in the U.S. [has diversified](#) in respect to location, with community colleges and satellite branches of major schools opening right in the heart of cities. The housing market may be slowly adapting to this trend, with smaller unit sizes and shared living spaces going up around these schools. One niche within this trend is “Urban Campus” style housing.

The reason that major universities are opening urban satellite campuses is that it puts students proximate to potential employers and a fun lifestyle. Urban Campus housing, which is generally built within walking distance of the classes, provides the units that students would want, or at least be more willing than the average person to tolerate. That is, projects can include micro-apartments, dorm-units, and shared spaces. They also sometimes have common areas, such as parks, that are open to the public. While the housing caters to students, they can be rented or bought by anyone. The developments thus integrate college students with their communities, and vice versa.

“The urban campus,” said Orlando developer Craig Ustler by phone, “is this idea that you interject [a project] into a bigger city, into a bigger urban context—some place that is not really dependent on the college to make the town. But it does enhance the urban context with which it is put into.”

There are several examples of this model already. "[Tech Square](#)" is a Georgia Tech institution that is divorced somewhat from the main campus, encompassing several blocks of Atlanta's Midtown neighborhood. It mixes student housing with a bunch of incubator spaces, tech firms and corporate offices. Arizona State University has a satellite [in downtown Phoenix](#) with a similar setting. And Ustler, who is president of [Ustler Group of Companies](#), is building something in Orlando called [Creative Village](#). This is a 68-acre master-planned development near downtown that will include housing, retail and public amenities, right next to the University of Central Florida's new downtown campus. The development will go atop the site of the city's old basketball arena, and be urban in character, with green spaces, bike infrastructure, and [limited parking](#).

Ustler says that the development will provide 3 housing options--market-rate apartments that are larger and have luxury features; cheaper apartments that are designed for students and other community members; and "purpose-built student housing", which is a fancy phrase for dorms. These dorms will fit 2 students within rooms of 500-600 square feet. Ustler said that he had considered micro-units as the fourth housing option, but felt they were an untested market in traditionally sprawling Orlando.



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A rendering of Creative Village

Although the Urban Campus model is now a niche concept mostly known among urban-oriented real estate developers, it taps, said Ustler, into the broader urban planning trend of Innovation Districts. In his 2014 book *The Metropolitan Revolution*, Brookings Institution scholar Bruce Katz described Innovation Districts as mixed-use urban clusters where educated people collide to generate ideas and economic activity. The Brookings Institution's website [says](#) they are "dense enclaves that merge the innovation and employment potential of research-oriented anchor institutions, high-growth firms, and tech and creative start-ups in well-designed, amenity-rich residential and commercial environments."

Innovation Districts don't have to be near major universities. But it makes sense that the two would seek each other out, helping explain why universities began expanding into downtown areas to begin with. Urban Campus housing is meant simply to provide the lodging needed for such places.

The big factor that could prevent Urban Campus housing from taking off is regulations. There is already great resistance against new housing within America's densest urban settings, and it seems to grow stronger the smaller the units being proposed. Micro units, for example, are regularly demagogued as a substandard housing option, something young people shouldn't be allowed to live in for their own good. One can only imagine the outrage that would surface once urbanites began living together in 2-person dorms (as if they were in college, or something).

But assuming that more Urban Campus housing is allowed, it'll provide a cheap housing option for a demographic--students--that often otherwise subdivide housing in single-family neighborhoods, making those areas noisier and more expensive. Ustler said that dorm beds would sell for \$690/month in his Orlando project.

Perhaps more importantly, Urban Campus housing would be an organic response to the ongoing changes in higher education.

“The great new American university is by definition urban,” said Ustler. “That’s where the market is, that’s where the market wants to be educated, and that’s where all the intelligence and the diversity and brainpower is concentrating.”

Scott Beyer owns a media company called [The Market Urbanism Report](#), and is traveling the U.S. to write a book on reviving cities. His Twitter handle is @sbcrosscountry.