

Rise of singles changing how we live in cities



29 May 2015

It's increasingly common to live alone with social norms changing faster than the built environment, causing a mismatch between the type of housing demanded & the available stock.

"Demographics & social norms typically change faster than the built environment. As a result, few cities have enough housing units for the growing number of single householders. In many countries, the rise of singles is driving demand for more micro housing. Existing home owners often resist densification while current city regulations – particularly in cities like London – make releasing & rezoning land for new developments extremely difficult."

Increasingly a nation of single people, living in a world built for families

Over the past few decades it has become [increasingly common](#) to live alone. From singles to divorcees and the elderly, more people are living in households of just one. More than a quarter of US households now contain only one person, up from just 7% in 1940. Even in SA, the recent Census revealed a steady **decline in the number of people per household** while the number of adults living alone has increased.

This **demographic trend** has a number of consequence – including a growing mismatch between the emerging demand for housing suitable for singles and the current housing stock. Globally, housing has typically been built for the **traditional nuclear family**, not for a society full of singles. This growing disconnect between the emerging appetite for accommodation for a single occupant and the available family orientated housing stock is particularly prevalent in big cities.

Demographics and social norms typically change faster than the built environment. As a result, few cities have enough housing units for the **growing number of single householders** – resulting in many people paying for more space than they require or being forced to share accommodation.

In many countries, **the rise of singles** is driving demand for more **micro housing such as studio (or micro) apartments** and accessory dwelling units, in which additional housing units are added to an existing home. It has also been suggested that there is a need for a different housing model which would allow for a group of individuals to have separate units but share some common spaces.

Existing home owners often resist such densification while current city regulations – particularly in cities like London – make releasing and rezoning land for **new developments** extremely difficult. But there are cities where the necessary regulatory changes are beginning to happen. For example, Washington is in the process of reviewing zoning regulations to potentially allow more accessory dwelling units while New York has begun testing the idea of [micro housing units](#).

SA developers are also responding to local changes in demographics and social norms. Flats and townhouses have risen from just 10.9% of total plans passed in the first quarter of 2000 to nearly 38% in early-2015. While factors such as **affordability and congestion** have undoubtedly contributed to the rising trend of sectional title units under construction, the rising demand from people living alone will certainly have reinforced this trend as it has done in cities around the world.