URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS – MULTIFAMILY CODE UPDATE
White Paper: Townhouses

The popularity of the townhouse

Across Seattle, average sale prices for townhouses are consistently on par with increasing resale values for standard two-bedroom, one-bath single family houses in Seattle. Given the low number of new single family homes built in the city each year, the townhouse is a close alternative to buying a single family home, but generally without the maintenance costs of a house built 50 to 100 years ago. The livable square footage of townhouses being built are typically a little bit larger than a standard Seattle craftsman-style home, and they come with the types of amenities that buyers look for and sellers tend to add: modern kitchens, and one bathroom per bedroom. Townhouses that are located within walking distance to urban amenities found in business districts, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and various other services, will tend to sell for a premium.

Seattle's current land use and subdivision regulations allow for townhouse structures to be built and for buyers to own the land beneath them. This process results in an ownership situation that shares similarities with both single family home and condominium ownership. The "unit-lot subdivision" is the process by which the units and the land are divided, resulting in a fee-simple mortgage for buyers, which they tend to prefer as with single family homes. As with condominiums, townhouse owners share a common interest in the structure and must maintain a relationship with the other owners for maintenance purposes. Townhouse owners do not have to pay association fees or dues as condominium owners do. This can be a factor considered by banks when qualifying individuals for home loans. The popularity and relative ease of financing means the townhouse developer can recover their investment more quickly, and it also means that the banks are repaid their construction loans—plus interest—more quickly.

General townhouse characteristics

Almost all townhouse development takes place in the Lowrise zones, which are meant to accommodate a variety of housing types and densities. Lowrise zones often serve as a transition between areas of single family housing and commercial and mixed-use areas of greater density. Townhouses are often located on or near arterials and most are inside or very near to urban village boundaries.

The townhouses that are being built, while generally of a much higher design quality than the apartments of the 80s and early 90s, are both homogeneous and ubiquitous. The following characteristics are typical of recent development:

- Units sizes of 1,000 to 1,400 square feet, 3 stories in height.
- Standard configuration of 4-8 units in duplex or triplex structures with garage doors and some entrances oriented around a common auto courtyard.
- One garage underneath each unit.
- Small fenced front and rear yards, functioning as private open space.
- Dens next to the garage open to the ground-level open spaces.
- Small decks off of dining rooms/kitchens on the 2nd floor.
- Small decks off of master suites on the 3rd floor.
- Usually 3 bathrooms: one on the 2nd floor, one in each bedroom on the 3rd floor.

Factors that influence townhouse design

Amendments to Multifamily Code. During the 1980s, residential development in Seattle primarily consisted of only low density single family and relatively high density multi-unit buildings. While the multi-unit structures often resulting in affordable units, many were considered of questionable aesthetic quality. This led to anti-density sentiment, and with it tighter code restrictions on stacked flats. Development standards for encouraging more ground-related multifamily housing in the middle range of the density scale were adjusted (i.e. granting additional permitted lot coverage and building width and depth and lower parking requirements). These development standards that made stacked flats less attractive to build while encouraging ground-related housing, combined with new subdivision incentives, resulted in a housing type that Seattle hadn't seen much of yet: townhouses. The subdivision provisions also were intended to increase home ownership.

Unit lot subdivision. The new subdivision incentive is the unit-lot subdivision, which allows buyers their own unit, land, and small yard. A shared easement is generally required for driveway access to garages. The yards associated with each unit meet the requirements of the "ground-related" development standards in the Multifamily Land Use Code. Depending on the zone, an average of around 300 square feet of private ground-level open space must be associated with and accessible to each unit.

Development standards. Projects that meet the ground-related provisions are allowed a larger maximum envelope than those that do not. These provisions include a greater lot coverage allowance and the ability to build wider and deeper structures, and were intended as incentives for townhouses. Previous to these incentives it was thought that townhouse development could not compete with stacked flats. Market preferences, Code amendments resulting in less favorable standards for stacked flats, the high cost of single family homes and favorable interest rates have all combined so that it is now difficult to point to one source of the popularity of townhouses

SEPA and design review thresholds. Townhouse developers report that another regulatory factor is critical to their ability to build. The thresholds for environmental and design review influence the number of units proposed. The thresholds for these review processes start at projects with 9 or more units in the Lowrise 3 (L3) zone. In Lowrise Duplex/Triplex (LDT) through L2 zones, no projects of any size are required to go through these reviews. This leads to quicker review times for these small projects, an important factor for smaller builders that rely on a quick turn-around to meet banks' construction loan requirements, often offered for only 12 months before becoming much more expensive. It is evident that most developers of townhouse projects will avoid building more than 8 units in a project in zones with thresholds, even if it means splitting a project into two separate permit reviews. This has a fairly big influence on the density and unit counts of townhouse projects in the denser Lowrise zones.

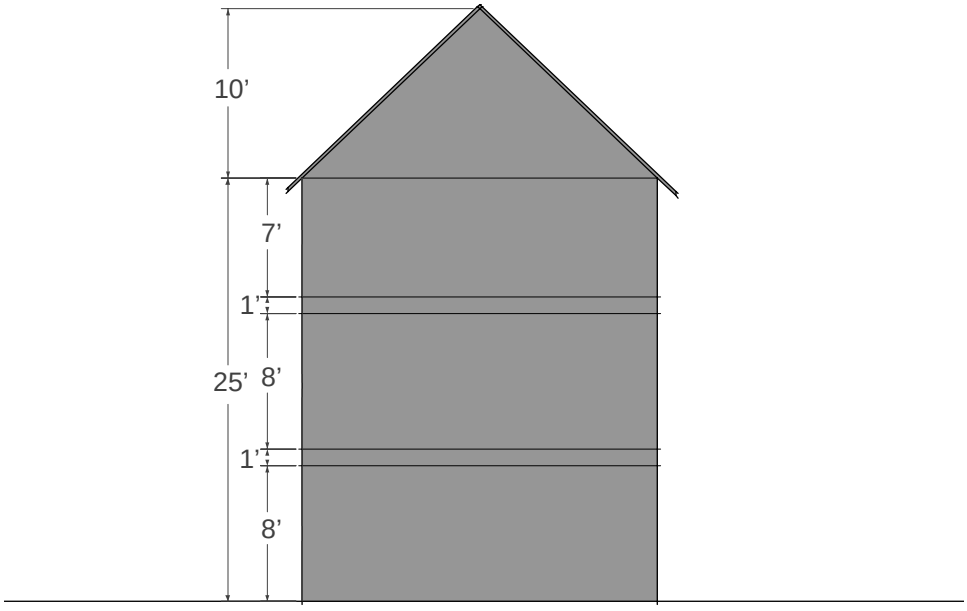
Market forces. Most residential development in Seattle maximizes the developable envelope prescribed by zoning. Since buyers often view townhouses as alternatives to single family homes, the floor areas are typically similar in size, ranging from 1,000 to 1,400 square feet for each unit. Factoring in high labor costs, financially it makes sense to build the most square footage possible on a site to be able to recoup these costs.

Jory Phillips/Dennis Meier
April 10, 2006

Townhouse development standard issues and opportunities

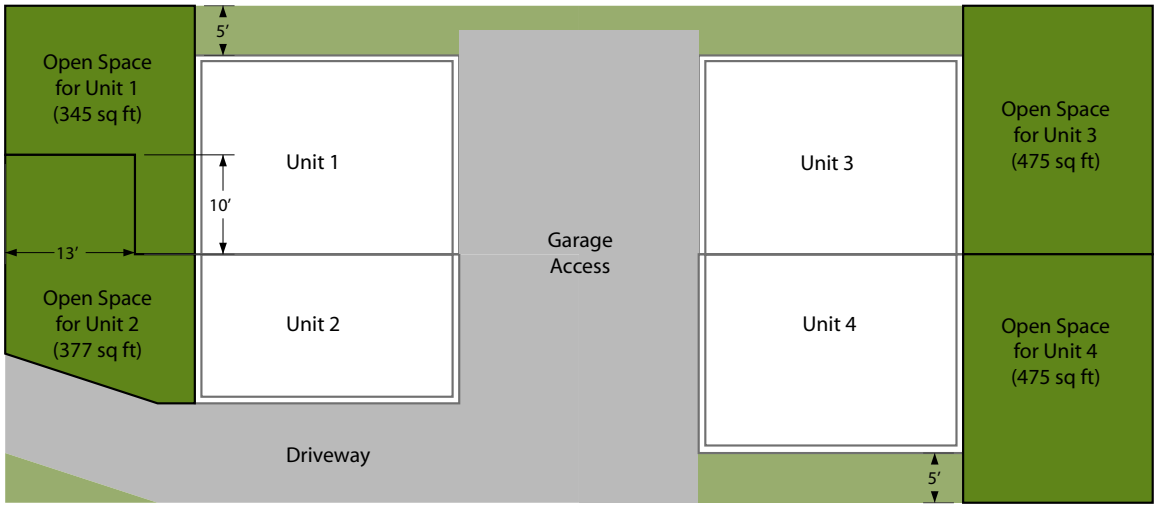
Some of the development standards in place today in the Lowrise zones may make it more difficult for townhouses to be built than necessary. Additionally, some development standards may not be resulting in features that should be emphasized in standard development in the future. These include height, open space, and rear yard setback requirements for lots on alleys.

Height. In the Lowrise Duplex/Triplex (LDT), Lowrise 1 (LI), and Lowrise 2 (L2) zones, the maximum allowed height limit for structures is lower than that allowed for less intensive Single Family zones. While the height limit in SF zones is 30 feet with an additional 5 feet allowed for a pitched roof, in the LDT, L1 and L2 zones the height limit is 25 feet plus 10 feet for a pitched roof. This allows for the three-story units and resulting square footage that the primary market demands for townhouses, but the top floors in these units must have shorter walls and sloped ceilings. Some developers will partially bury the ground floor of townhouses in these zones so that they are able to build a standard 8-foot wall on the top floor. The following diagram illustrates the maximum allowed height in L2 and lower zones for roofs with a minimum 6:12 pitch. A logical increase in the height allowed below the roof pitch to be consistent with what is allowed in Single Family zones could provide for the use of standard-length materials for walls on the 3rd floor of townhouses and would allow higher ceilings on all floors for townhouse occupants. This would not significantly increase the bulk of the structures but could improve the livability of these multifamily units, and perhaps also encourage stacked flats in zones, where they are allowed, because this height would allow for a more usable top floor.



Open Space

Open space for ground-related units in Lowrise zones is rigorously shaped by Land Use Code requirements. However, the requirements often do not result in quality, spaces that are frequently used. To qualify as “ground-related,” the project must provide an average of 300 square feet of private, usable open space for each unit, with a minimum of 200 square feet per unit. Further, a minimum dimension of 10 feet is required for any area to count as open space. The following illustration, a site plan of a standard townhouse project, shows the typical application of these requirements (plus standards such as front and rear setbacks). The lighter-shaded 5-foot wide areas created by the side setback requirements do not count in meeting the open space requirement.

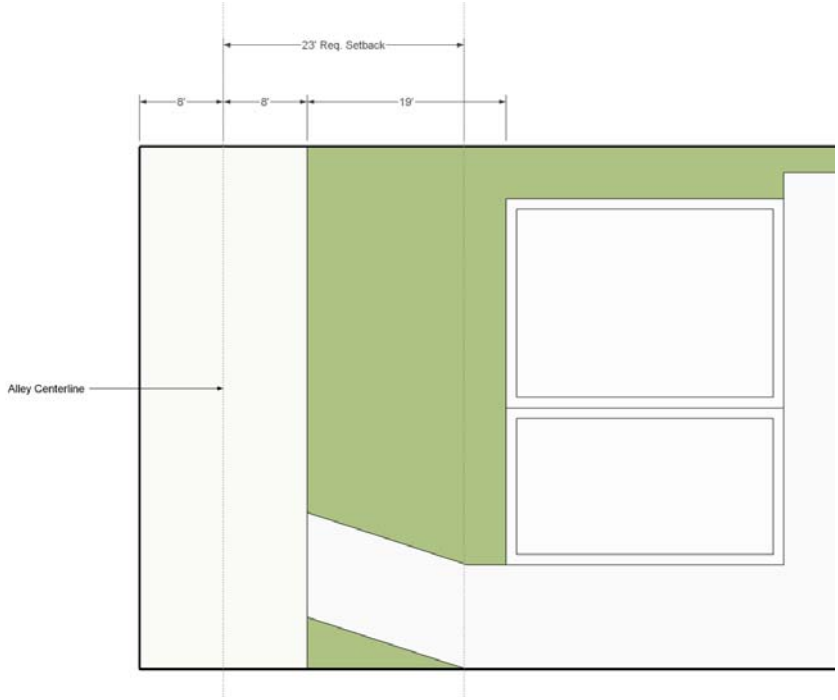


The above figure also illustrates how much of the lot is dedicated to driveway and garage access in the standard constructed townhouse configuration. In the above case, nearly one third of the lot is driveway and garage access. Another one third of the lot is required ground-level open space and/or front and rear setbacks from the property lines.

Because of the requirements for parking location and access, the design of most townhouse sites begins with access to parking, then setbacks from property lines, and followed by other standards. Particularly because the site shown is not adjacent to an alley, the amount of parcel area dedicated to the automobile is high. A difficulty in overcoming this is the fact that redevelopment in lowrise zones takes place in a piecemeal fashion because two or three adjacent lots are required to more easily design efficient site layouts. Because a townhouse project often replaces single family homes, one of more of the lots may have owners who are holding out for higher prices, making assemblage difficult and unpredictable.

Another difficulty is that the open spaces provided are almost always fenced in a manner that creates a wall between the sidewalk and the unit. Many townhouses have a cedar fence facing the sidewalk. While this can provide some additional sense of security for the owners, it can actually make for less-safe streets, as they can't see who is walking by on the sidewalk outside. In general, a solid fence is not a positive pedestrian-friendly contribution to the streetscape, and the resulting spaces are often referred to as "cattle pens" due to the confinement of the open space with fencing.

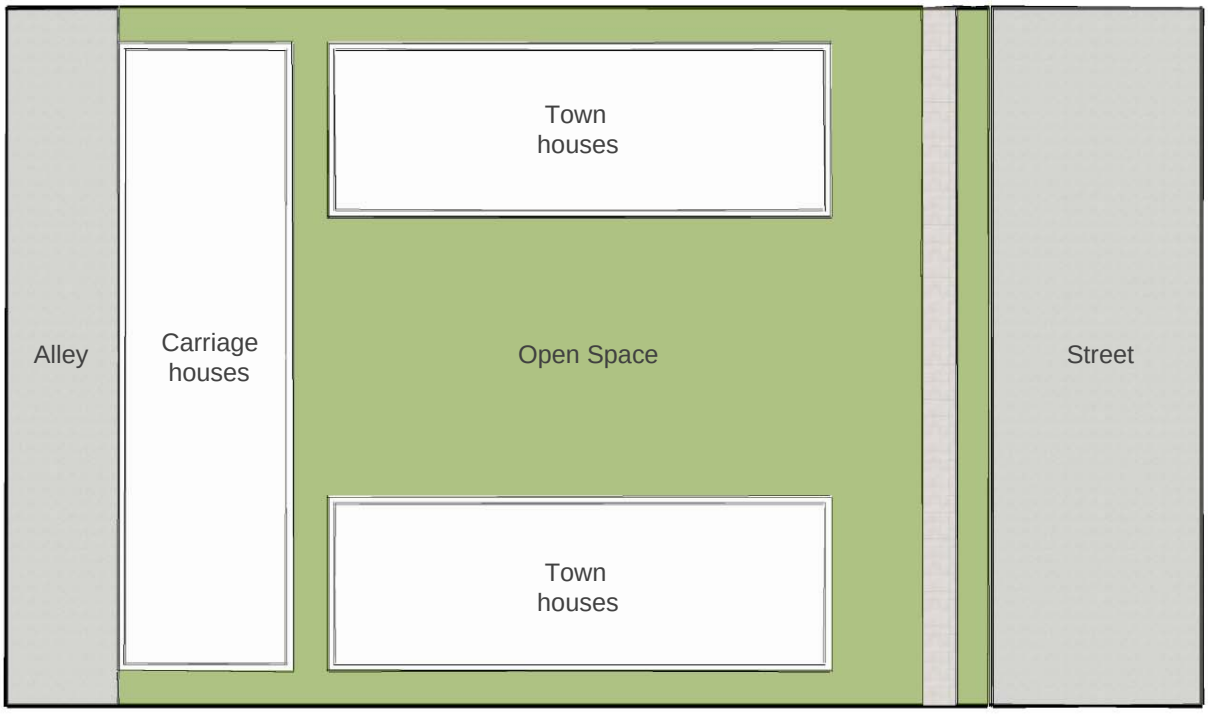
Alleys. Lowrise-zoned areas with alleys could provide an opportunity for a small increase in ground-related units while still fitting in with neighborhood character. While the Land Use Code allows garages in the rear setbacks of lowrise zones, units above them are not allowed. The carriage house, essentially a unit above a garage along an alley, is a time-tested form of housing. Alleys are natural buffers between lots, and lowrise zones could provide housing more efficiently if carriage houses were allowed. The diagram below illustrates current rear setback rules for ground-related housing, which require a setback of 25 feet or a maximum of 20% of the lot depth, whichever is smaller, to a minimum of 15 feet. The setback may be measured from the centerline of the alley where they are present.



Modifications to development standards to allow carriage houses could result in more efficient use of limited multi-family zoned land as well as more meaningful open spaces. Locating parking adjacent to an alley affords the opportunity to orient units around a common open space. A “U-shaped” orientation was very common among multifamily structures built in the early part of the last century. Some successful models with similar characteristics have been built in recent years in Seattle, as the following picture of the “Miller Mews” project in Miller Park demonstrates.

The following schematic site plan shows how a “mews” arrangement could apply on two standard lowrise-zoned lots. Adjacent to alleys, the potential exists to greatly reduce the amount of land dedicated to automobile access and at the same time increase and improve housing and open space. This can have another positive side effect: more pedestrian-

friendly streets. A different plat pattern is used for sites such as this, and easements need to be created for the garages below the carriage units. Depending on the size of the lot and number of units, reduced parking requirements relative to what is required now may be necessary to accomplish this form of development. Existing restrictions on structure depth, distances between structures, setbacks, and particularly open space and parking revisions would also likely need to be modified to achieve this model.



Conclusions

Seattle is now getting the townhouse development and increased home ownership that our plans have been calling for since the 1980's, and this is positive news. The driver for this form of development is the interplay between the marketplace (high for-sale housing demand), the unit-lot subdivision process, and basic zoning and development standards.

Modifications to development standards would address some of the issues and opportunities presented here, as well as achieve a Land Use Code that is simpler to use and understand. Changes to Land Use Code should look to achieve the following concepts:

1. Minimize site area dedicated to vehicle access and circulation.
2. Provide usable, attractive, and well-integrated recreation amenities, such as shared courtyards, in place of current open space requirements.
3. Reinforce pedestrian-friendly streetscapes, human scale and fit of new townhouse projects.
4. Consider opportunities for encouraging smaller, additional units (such as carriage houses) that could be more affordable than standard townhouses.

5. Draw upon Seattle's experience with Design Review and design guidelines to improve the siting, massing, and street-front design of new multifamily development.
6. Allow for the stacking of dwelling units under certain conditions.

Preliminary recommendations for zoning provisions to carry out the concepts include:

1. To create additional housing and better-designed site layout opportunities, including improved open space and street-fronts, allow housing units to abut alleys. Allow garage doors below units on alleys to be setback 12 feet from the centerline of the alley.
2. To reflect greater heights allowed in lower-density single family zones and to improve the livability of new multifamily dwellings, allow townhouses in LDT, L1, and L2 zones to be as tall as houses in single family zones (30' or 35' with a pitched roof).
3. To reflect the need for smaller, less expensive townhouse-like units as well as higher levels of pedestrians and transit accessibility, reduce or eliminate parking requirements in urban centers and station areas.
4. To improve open spaces associated with townhouses, modify standards to allow and encourage common open spaces (example: 25% of the site, 15% of the total above-grade floor area, etc.)
5. Allow landscaped pedestrian pathways to count as open space.
6. Simplify detailed and complex rules related to structure width and depth, modulation and open space. Consider other means of addressing design quality.