

Courtyard Apartments

Courtyard housing is a distinct medium density multi-family housing typology centered on a shared outdoor open space or garden and surrounded by one or two floors of apartment units, typically only accessed by courtyard from the street (and not by an interior corridor).

Courtyard housing was easier to build in the mid-20th century before zoning codes began to require off-street parking along with new housing.

It's a housing type that offers greater density than a single family home on one lot, but can retain the "feel" of those neighborhoods and offer common space that serves families with children.

Yet it can be tricky, impossible, or uneconomical under typical Northwest zoning schemes to build courtyard housing. It's difficult to fit housing, mandatory parking spaces, and open ground on small urban lots. And even in jurisdictions such as Portland and Seattle that have changed zoning codes to encourage courtyard housing, it's confined to very small portions of those cities.



Portland Design Competition

In 2007, Portland saw that nearly all the new housing being built in the city were dense multifamily apartments or condos, and that single family detached homes were increasingly unaffordable. Worried that those options might not serve the needs of future families with children, the city sponsored a Courtyard Housing Competition, which invited architects to design innovative courtyard housing projects without being constrained by existing zoning laws.

The goals were to design infill development that 1) meets the needs of moderate-income families, 2) provides open space that serves multiple needs: kids play, socializing, parking, and minimizing polluted runoff and, 3) blends well with surrounding homes and streets.

Based on the winning designs, Portland adjusted its zoning codes in an effort to encourage more courtyard housing.

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