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Designed by AO for Bonanni Development, Cloud House will provide one of the biggest roof decks in Orange County. The award-winning project will break ground in Q2 2022.



California's Semi-Urban Zoom Towns – A modern lifestyle frontier

By Ioanna Magiati and Paolo Leon, AO

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of our lives, from how we work to where we live. With a significant percentage of Americans working remotely either full or part time, the pandemic launched a new workforce paradigm dictating for many Americans that where they choose to live need not be constrained by the physical location of their work, but instead based on their personal values and preference.

The pandemic broke down barriers to remote work, paving the way for a more flexible live/work lifestyle and proving that it is a viable option for many industries and workers. In turn, the normalization of remote work across the U.S. became a catalyst for the rapid growth of cities outside of the urban core; enter the Semi-Urban Zoom Town.

Semi-Urban Zoom Towns

Zoom Towns in general are small- to mid-sized towns or cities that are undergoing rapid growth due to an increase in remote or hybrid work opportunities. Before the pandemic, cities like Lake Tahoe, Napa or Big Bear in California may have been more aptly characterized as local weekend getaways or vacation destinations for city dwellers. These cities were attractive destinations because they offered ample outdoor activities, a less dense living environment and proximity to nature. Today, they are home to a growing population of Zoomers. Key factors that enable their growth include a robust broadband data network, availability of goods and services and access to highways and/or a public transit network.

Whereas Zoom Towns offer remote workers a permanent retreat from the city center, Semi-Urban Zoom Towns are a more desirable and practical option for telecommuters who may primarily work remotely but still maintain an office presence. Further, these often-overlooked cities such as Garden Grove and Stanton in Orange County, Rancho Cucamonga in

the Inland Empire and San Leandro in the Bay Area, all in California, are becoming more attractive to residents seeking both affordability and a higher standard of living.

The rise of the Semi-urban Zoom Town spurred by post-pandemic workforce culture has been met with both challenges and opportunities. While California cities grapple to respond to the housing crisis, Semi-Urban Zoom Towns are reimagining their communities as the new modern lifestyle frontier at a time when Zoomers are looking to relocate in search of affordability and a perceived



Designed for tech-savvy Zoomers, Modus, developed by TPC & AMG in San Leandro, features workspace in each compact micro-unit.

lifestyle enhancement. Recognizing the demand for quality housing and attracted by relatively lower construction costs, developers are also converging on Semi-Urban Zoom Towns to partner with cities in pursuit of a common vision for attainable, quality housing and economic and community revitalization.

Multifamily Solutions for Zoomers

Like everyone else, architects and developers

were clamoring to understand the effects that COVID-19 would have on the way people live and work in order to design new solutions. Predictions of varying accuracy were made, researched, adopted and subsequently debunked. Simultaneously, some observers hypothesized the death of common pools and fitness centers in multifamily development, or the complete urban exodus and demise of public parks.

Today, as society continues down the road to recovery, most would recognize that communities have changed very little, if at all in response to the pandemic. Instead of short-term reactions, highly nuanced movements like the emergence of Semi-urban Zoom Towns are driving long-term design solutions.

While not much has shifted in the general design of post-pandemic multifamily development, key features are driving the development of apartment communities in Semi-Urban Zoom Towns. For example, Cloud House, a five-story wrap located in Stanton, California has incorporated dens and offices within apartment units, while courtyards, co-working spaces and a bevy of common amenities cater to the Zoomer lifestyle.

Similarly, Modus in San Leandro, California, an approved five-story on-grade modular affordable development comprising 221 micro-units, utilizes creative and efficient floor plans, making room for workspaces in each compact unit.

Another characteristic of Semi-Urban Zoom Town dwellers is their value and view of technology as second nature. In response, communities like Iowa Apartments, a four-story repositioning garden-style development in Riverside, California have omitted a traditional leasing center, instead allowing for a street-level co-working coffee shop in its place and opting for a fully virtual platform for leasing activities.

Photography courtesy of AO



Cloud House offers a huge roof deck



Modus offers affordable housing

Designs for Housing Affordability

Despite a temporary pause across the building and construction industry at the onset of the pandemic, the development pipeline remains strong and construction costs remain volatile. Meeting the housing demand remains a challenge for cities across the state as they deal with the challenges of modified project approval processes; Semi-Urban Zoom Towns are no exception. To make matters more difficult, many cities are also pushing to satisfy their Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) allocations as mandated by the state, which aim to address the housing shortage across the state. Fortunately, Semi-Urban Zoom Towns offer a market advantage over their urban counterparts — undeveloped or

underutilized land. In response, architects are looking to develop options for efficient building types with lower construction costs, such as a three-story product with tuck-under parking. AO's R&D team identified an opportunity to fill a gap in the marketplace and developed a three-story prototype that improves efficiency with the goal of unlocking additional density to address the housing shortage and rising construction costs. The result is a more attractive investment option for developers, an inherently more attainable housing product and a boost in housing supply.

The Future of Post-COVID-19 Design

The broader adoption of remote work has paved the way for greater flexibility and choice

for where we call home. As a result, a substantial cohort of Americans is seeking the same things — an attainable, semi-urban lifestyle with more open space and lifestyle amenities rivaling urban developments.

The Semi-Urban Zoom Town has become an accessible and alluring prospect for developers and Zoomers. Innovative cities are welcoming change and fostering opportunity for architects to design practical housing solutions that deliver affordability and quality of life. Multifamily communities within Semi-Urban Zoom Towns will continue to be an important test ground for innovation, technology and the future of post-COVID-19 design.



Iowa Apartments employs a unique virtual leasing center, leaving opportunity for additional amenities like a street-level coffee shop