



A Colorful Portland Prototype Reinvents the SRO

Argyle Gardens, the nation's first affordable housing project to open during the pandemic, was designed by Holst Architecture to also be replicable.

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Courtesy Christian Columbres

When the pandemic and quarantine set in earlier this year, some of the hardest hit populations were low-income and homeless persons, especially seniors. That made the opening of Argyle Gardens (<https://www.argylegardensapts.com/>) in Portland's Kenton neighborhood particularly well timed.

"As far as I know we were the first affordable housing project to open during Covid," says Tony Bernal, a senior director at Transition Projects (<https://www.tprojects.org/our-story/our-story>), a local organization that commissioned the project. "We were desperately hoping we would not get shut down as we neared completion."

Opened in April of this year, the colorful Argyle Gardens project was designed by Portland firm Holst Architecture (<https://holstarc.com/>) to help fill the gap between homeless shelters and traditional apartments. After receiving a grant from the nonprofit Meyer Memorial Trust, the architects and client sought to develop a flexible design that reimagines traditional single-room-occupancy affordable housing, which has slowly disappeared across America.

“Typically SROs are large, hotel-like structures that could have 200 or more units,” Bernal adds. We wanted to see if we could do something a little more community oriented.”



Courtesy Portlandrone

The four-building complex is anchored by a 35-unit studio apartment building, with a large community room with laundry facilities and support staff offices serves as a central hub. But it’s a trio of adjacent smaller buildings devoted to cohousing that represent the first in a prototype dubbed Low Income Single Adult Housing, or LISAH, that the team hopes others can build elsewhere. Each features two six-bedroom units with two shared bathrooms and a large kitchen.

“You can build it with residential code and put it on virtually any residential lot in the city, or for that matter the state,” explains Holst partner Dave Otte of the design. “Everybody has a bedroom with a locking door, but they’re sharing a kitchen and they’re sharing their lives with one another.”

Situated on a sloping, formerly industrial city-owned site, Argyle Gardens, due to its use of prefabricated parts, saved an estimated 31 percent on construction costs compared to a typical affordable housing project. The project consists of four buildings each accommodating 24 residents, with a large central courtyard





Courtesy Josh Partee

The prefab approach, in collaboration with Portland modular builder [Mods \(http://www.mod-spdx.com/\)](http://www.mod-spdx.com/), is all about keeping costs down, while the buildings' scale makes them more neighborhood friendly. "We wanted to see if we could figure out a rent that if you only had social security and no federal housing voucher, you could actually make," Bernal explains. Some units go for as little as \$300 per month.

Viewed from outside, the buildings are distinctive for their multi-hued, translucent facades that reveal the staircases inside. "We came up with the idea to use the stairway as the celebration moment," recalls Otte. The stairways are protected from the elements but not insulated and are clad with a polycarbonate material commonly used in greenhouses. "It becomes this lantern element," the architect adds, "this beacon that gives the building a sense of personality and an iconic nature."



George, a new resident of Argyle Gardens

Courtesy Transition Projects

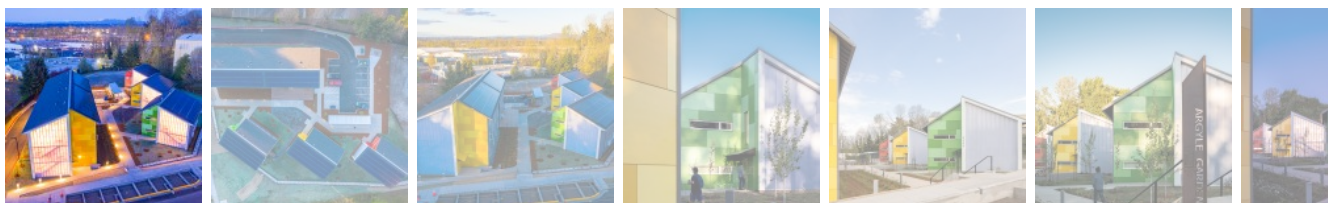
Part of what makes Argyle Gardens attractive is the 70,000-square-foot site's generous outdoor space for both socializing and activities. By request, land has been reserved for a future community garden and dog run. Yet most important may be the central courtyard, which acts as a gathering

space for the three buildings.

“This project was so centered around the idea of community and bringing people together,” says Bernal. “The traditional SRO models work well in a lot of ways,” he adds. “But there are also some advantages to doing it slightly differently.”

Courtesy Portlandro

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