



**Top:** Jason R. Shepard, AIA, is a principal and director of multifamily housing at Atlanta-based Dwell Design Studio, an architecture, planning, interiors and environmental design firm.

**Bottom:** David Neiman, AIA, is a principal at Seattle-based Neiman Taber Architects, an urban housing design firm specializing in affordable housing solutions.

Construction is expected to begin this year on 500 West Trade, a 354-unit Charlotte, N.C. apartment community, that wraps a 6-story mid-rise podium wood frame structure around a 14-story steel and concrete tower. The hybrid design allows a more diverse rent structure, with the mid-rise portion offering more affordability and unit density. The location is an abandoned 2.8-acre site in downtown Charlotte. Image courtesy of Dwell Design Studio

# WOOD: HELPING POWER AN URBAN RENAISSANCE

Today many of us long to hang up our car keys and return to the simple pleasures of a stroll or bike ride to the store, restaurant, park, or work. Urban infill housing supports walkable communities and wood construction plays a major role how it affordably pencils-out.

It's never been so easy to find great examples of urban infill housing projects.

All across America, new homes, multifamily developments, and mixed-use projects are breathing new life in under-utilized and abandoned urban spaces. Today scores of Millennials and others favor the car-free conveniences of a walkable, sustainable urban lifestyle ... provided affordable housing is available.

That final caveat is often the operating challenge for urban planners. How do you revitalize city neighborhoods with infill housing projects that meet code requirements and generate the kind of profit math that attracts developer dollars?

## Two Infill Perspectives

Meet David Neiman of Seattle, Wash. and Jason Shepherd of Atlanta, Ga. Both are AIA architects

and leading practitioners of the New Urbanism. In distinctively different ways they are helping reinvent what's possible with constructive infill development.

David Neiman, principal of Neiman Taber Architects, specializes in designing affordable housing in "the little leftover spaces that are difficult to develop using conventional models." One unconventional model is congregate



Yobi Apartments is a 4-story, 45-unit microhousing community located in an infill site near the University of Seattle. Yobi is an example of congregate housing, characterized by a common kitchen on each floor with the units built like a “ship’s cabin with snug dimensions and lots of built in amenities,” according to architect David Neiman. The wood frame structure includes an assortment

of energy-saving features, including a high-performance envelope using blown-in-blanket and spray foam insulation. The Yobi Apartments and 500 West Trade (facing page) meet all code requirements for life safety, including an assortment of active and passive fire prevention systems. Photos courtesy of William P. Wright

housing. Congregate housing is a stylish next-generation update of rooming houses, boarding houses, dormitories, and single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels. The two-year-old Yobi Apartment, an infill project in Seattle’s fashionable Capitol Hill district, illustrates the approach.

### More Affordability

“The Yobi Apartment is a four-story, 14,000 square foot building with 45 micro apartment units. The units range from 147 to 288 square feet,” Neiman says. Average rent for a studio in the area ranges from \$1,400 to \$1,800 a month. Congregate housing units rent for about \$1,000 a month.

“One of the keys to making micro housing work is simplicity. You want to build them simply and efficiently, and that’s all about

wood construction. Light frame wood construction is the way to do these projects,” Neiman explains.

Neiman also likes the thermal properties of wood. “Wood makes it much easier to build an efficient envelope,” Neiman says. Based on energy use per person, the Yobi is 70 percent more energy efficient than conventional housing, according to Neiman.

### Rent Structure?

For Shepherd, the goal is similar but the approach is different.

“I always ask about rent structure first,” says the CEO and creative director of Dwell Design Studio, a multifamily and mixed-use development specialist. About 60 to 70 percent of their work is infill driven, according to Shepherd.

### Hybrid Solutions

“Most of our developers prefer to work with wood. A lot of our projects are five stories of wood frame over two levels of concrete podium,” Shepherd says. “Most jurisdictions want retail services at ground level to serve the residents. A podium frame is the best way to achieve that street-level experience. We’re starting to see more wood frame wrap projects. We just finished one in Nashville and are working on ones in Charlotte and Savannah now. The wood wrap achieves more density, minimizes construction costs, and helps offset land costs.”

For Shepherd, the development economics of wood are compelling, especially when the rent structure pencils-out to a mid-rise project. “Wood frame has very few limitations,” he says. “Anytime you can build with wood, you should. It’s a cost effective means for building infill projects.”