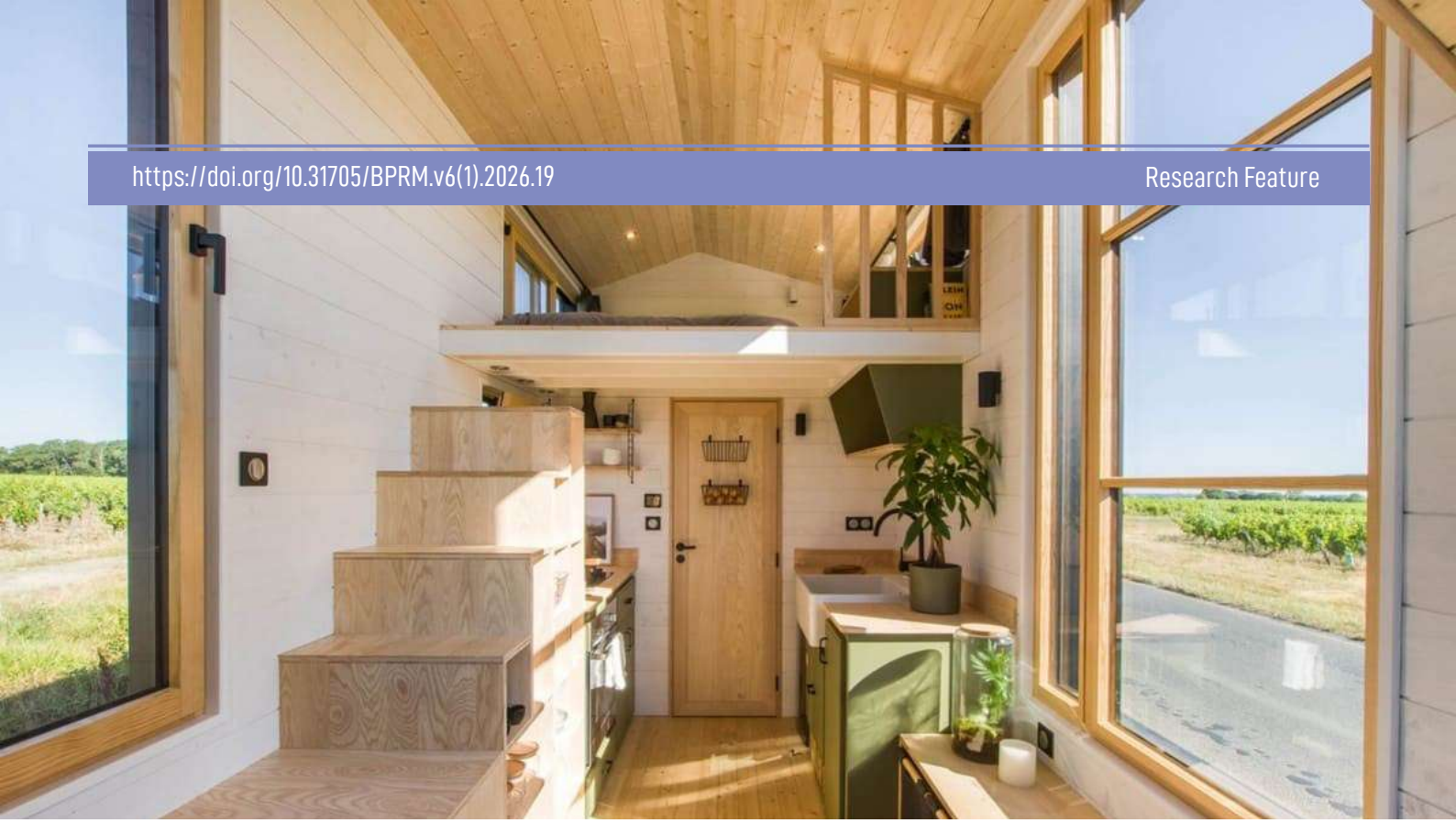


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Small Spaces, Big Solutions: The Potential of Micro Housing in Sri Lanka

With land prices rising rapidly in cities, especially in Colombo, urban space becoming increasingly scarce, the challenge of providing affordable housing is more pressing than ever. Conventional housing models are becoming less achievable for many urban residents, particularly young professionals and smaller households. In this context, alternative housing concepts such as micro housing are gaining global attention.

'Micro Housing' or 'Tiny Housing' has gained traction as one such alternative, and it describes a range of housing options that are smaller in size than the traditional residential units. These houses are designed to provide the necessities of living while minimizing space usage, usually ranging between 100 – 400 ft^2 (6 – 37m^2) [1], [2]. Basically, a micro house consists of a spacious room integrating the kitchen, dining area and living room, along with a small bathroom near the kitchen with all the facilities, and sleeping lofts with ladders [1]. Especially, it incorporates convertible couches, movable and foldable furniture, fold down beds (murphy), sliding doors and innovative shelving. These features collectively contribute to improved spatial efficiency, enhanced livability, cost savings, while also supporting more sustainable and functional space arrangements to arrange all the requirements of a typical house in a relatively small area. However, each micro house is unique due to the prioritization of customer needs in designing. Later, apartments less than 215 ft^2 (20m^2) were introduced as micro apartments by integrating micro living concept with apartments [2].

People who prioritize simple life are willing to go for micro living as they offer a small living space and reduce consumerism. Moreover, research on micro-housing has examined its potential to address urban housing affordability and density challenges, with particular attention to compact design, spatial efficiency, liveability, and the needs of diverse urban residents [1], [2]. Consequently, micro houses are globally recognized as a promising option to the declined housing affordability due to the economic crisis, inflation, and low economic conditions, especially in high congested cities [1]. Indeed, both global north countries and global

south countries, who experience severe unaffordability in housing, have adopted urban micro-living. Rapid urbanization and limited land have led several Asian countries, including India, Japan, China, and Thailand, to reduce apartment sizes by about 25% over the past decade [2]. Developers increasingly focus on compact units that maintain quality while improving affordability, allowing residents to live in cities at lower costs and responding to growing urban housing demand.

In this case, micro housing, particularly micro apartments, becomes a promising approach by providing affordable quality living. Micro apartments were initially designed for single residents seeking independent living or for those unable to afford conventional city center studios but not eligible for social housing. Today, the market has expanded to include young couples and professionals who value flexible urban living. Successful examples around the world from New York's Carmel Place (My Micro NY) [3] to Japan's Kyosho Jutaku [4] demonstrate how compact, well-designed spaces can support growing urban populations. The 'Carmel Place' attracted over 60,000 applications for just 14 affordable units, demonstrating strong demand [3], while in Tokyo, Kyosho Jutaku as small as 95ft^2 have successfully accommodated over 1,500 tenants at relatively low rents [4], highlighting their effectiveness in improving affordability and access to high-demand urban locations.



Figure 1: 'Carmel Place', a micro apartment building in New York [3]



Figure 2: 'Kyosho Jutaku', a micro apartment building in Japan [4]

Similar to Tokyo and New York City, Colombo is experiencing rising land values, increasing rental pressures, and a growing population of single and young urban residents, indicating a strong potential for micro-living to address emerging affordability and density challenges [5]. The limited availability of affordable, high-quality housing, particularly for middle-income residents, further highlights this need, such as high land prices and the prevalence of luxury and semi-luxury apartments constrain housing affordability [5], [6]. From an expert perspective, construction costs can be lower than conventional apartments if implemented at a smaller scale [6]. Design approaches that maximize natural light, ventilation, and minimize material waste further support cost efficiency and sustainability. However, high land prices and limited availability continue to challenge affordability [5]. Additionally, while smaller units may suit young individuals and retirees living alone, broader market acceptance and the cost of maintaining quality compact design remain key considerations.

Further, cultural integration in housing is evolving, with traditional elements increasingly adapted into modern living through smaller decorative features rather than large spatial requirements [6]. While people tend to resist change, acceptance grows as societal needs shift. Young individuals, couples, and retirees show positive attitudes towards micro living due to its affordability, simplicity, and ease of maintenance [1], [6]. Many prefer rental options, particularly in urban areas like Colombo. Although cultural preferences remain important, they are not seen as a barrier, highlighting that well-designed micro housing can be effectively localised to suit changing lifestyles.



Figure 3: Harbour View Residencies in Colombo 13 by UDA [7]

In fact, initial steps toward micro-living in Sri Lanka are evident through Urban Development Authority initiatives targeting low to middle income groups such as the Urban Regeneration Programme, Harbour View Residencies, and Stadiumgama Housing Project, which deliver compact apartments of approximately 500–550 ft^2 [6] [7]. While larger than typical micro-units, these schemes reflect a shift toward reduced floor areas to improve affordability and optimize urban land use. Thus, implementation of micro apartments is viable however, successful adaptation requires revising floor area sizes and optimizing spatial arrangements while minimizing reliance on foldable furniture [6]. There is a generally positive perception towards micro apartments, though improvements in layout and usability are essential.

Micro housing can serve as a valuable component of Sri Lanka's housing market, supporting rental markets and addressing urban growth pressures. Its relevance is particularly evident in Colombo, where high land costs and limited affordable housing make compact housing options increasingly important [6]. While not a universal solution, it offers a practical response to affordability challenges. With thoughtful design adaptations and supportive policies, micro housing can contribute to more sustainable and inclusive urban living in Colombo.

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