

Live-work findings usage report

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After traveling around the city – from Columbia City to Ballard, First Hill to Fremont – I have been able to track the main usage trends of live-work zoning in the Seattle area. I traveled to or contacted approximately 20 different sites and documented a variety of uses of these spaces.

Patterns of Usage

Of the spaces that were being used for live-work, the majority were either health-related or professional businesses. There were a good deal of law offices and quite a few property management or real estate developers.

There were almost as many hair stylists and masseuses. There was only one retail location – a miniature cars business – and there weren't any manufacturing businesses as far as I could tell.

Ironically, there was only space I visited that was inhabited by an artist. There was also another one that was the space of a professional photographer. Here is a list of business types that are working in the locations I visited:



- Law offices (4)
- Real estate and development (4)
- Marketing and business (2)
- Artistic and photography (2)
- Banking (1)
- Software development (1)
- Fitness studio (1)
- Café (1)
- Retail (1)

The vast majority of the spaces I visited were not places in which people were constantly coming in and out of, but instead offices and services at street-level.

Differences based on types of spaces

The biggest factor I noticed in regards to how a live-work unit was being utilized was the involvement of the landlord in who he or she lets live there.

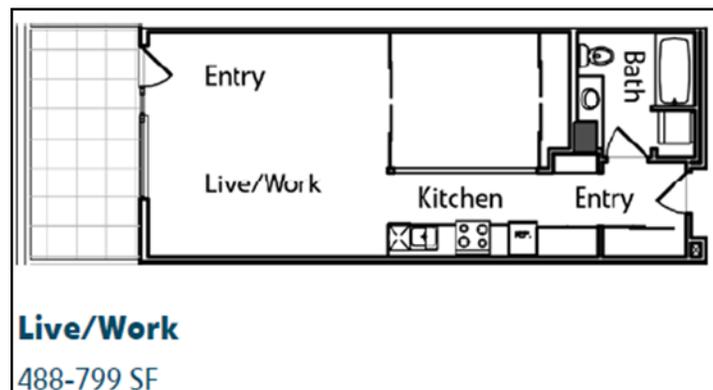
Among the better live-work developers such as Mark Knoll and the owner of the storied brick buildings in Columbia City, the units are typically rented out by businesses. Of all of Knoll's properties I visited, only one was used solely residentially. The rest were used as either mixed-use or solely commercial (mostly offices and professional work). Knoll doesn't have very many properties, he said, so he is able to better pick his applicants to fit the live-work mold. Just as importantly, the units he builds are heavily marketed and designed as live-work, so people know what they are getting into.

On the other hand, I visited several large apartment/condominium buildings (particularly in First Hill, Green Lake and Ballard) that had very relaxed policies on who they allowed to reside in the live-work units. The apartment complex in Green Lake told me it was "first come, first served." Of the roughly twenty live-work units among the three complexes I visited, only two were actually being used as businesses. The rest were solely residential. The spaces were all sold, however, and each of the landowners said there was a good demand for those spots.

Design issues of live-work units

In my survey, I also noticed that the design of the units had an effect on how they were being used. It might just be causation of the owner, but there was a difference between the spaces in the better live-work units and the worse ones.

In the better ones, there is a clear separation from home and work. The best situations divided the live and work portions by stairs. Knoll's units and the units in Columbia City were specifically designed to be used for different reasons, and the architecture and usage patterns follow. That isn't always the case, though; the live-work units on Market Street in Ballard were separated top and bottom but were primarily residential.



On the other hand, the units that weren't being utilized as one might imagine were often barely differentiable. These spaces were live-work by name, only. Often times, the big room would be

called “live/work.” As a result, space considerations would essentially force any customer-driven business to find another space due to a sheer lack of room. These units, however, could be utilized by professional services without a huge demand for space.

The landlords of the larger apartment complexes repeatedly said that the live-work units were a hot commodity for a couple of reasons. First, they are on street-level, which is a great benefit for people who either like the idea of living among the hustle and bustle, who have pets, or who just prefer the convenience. The units also have higher ceilings, which a landlord in Green Lake told me was very appealing to the building’s tenants.

Addressing the problem

The well-managed and planned live-work units serve their purposes well: they’re green, they’re cost-effective, they do something to activate the streets and they are convenient. But the residential units don’t accomplish any of those things, and, in fact, they impede the activation of the streets that was one of the bigger goals of live-work.



One of the biggest issues, from my amateur knowledge, has to do with zoning. Many of these large condominium buildings are in commercially-zoned spaces, and the residential building developers and property managers are forced to abide by land-use codes. As such, in order to still comply with the commercial part of the code, they are able to put live-work spaces (which are used residentially but are termed as commercial) on the ground floor to use the entire space as residential – because they aren’t discriminating based on whether the person to live in the live-work unit will also run a business.

Potential solutions: business licenses

Although perfectly legal, the apartment buildings in commercial areas that provide “live-work” units to the first bidder to satisfy zoning requirements don’t exactly mesh with the spirit of the ordinance. They are used primarily residentially and activate the streets just a little bit more than a vacant commercial unit. Although there are a few situations in which the pre-crafted live-work spaces are used solely residentially, those are outliers.

One potential option to fix this situation is to put forth a stricter structure in regards to business licenses. Under Ordinance 121196, a “live-work unit” is defined as:

“where the commercial or manufacturing activity conducted takes place subject to a valid business license associated with the premises.”

I had a hard time cross-referencing business licenses with premises, but it seems to me from speaking with the landlords as well as doing some of my own research that there is no impetus on the part of the building owners to check to see if a future tenant has a business license.

Adding some sort of a requirement that each space in use must have a business license associated to the premises, either as a mandate to the property manager or a potential fine, to all future live-work units could help cut down on that kind of usage. I don't think, however, the business should necessarily have to be licensed to the people living in the unit, but that a business license be there regardless, which would allow for greater flexibility while maintaining the original intent.

Then again, a policy like this could have negative consequences. In times like these, the City likely wouldn't want lessen demand for housing. Likewise, that kind of a policy could lead to empty spaces, rather than ones filled residentially.

Conclusion

There are a lot of good examples in Seattle of live-work spaces being used creatively and effectively, but there is room for improvement. If a change is deemed necessary, consultation with the developers who are doing it effectively would be important to make sure the City is not inhibiting their ability to do what they're doing.

Live-work spaces are an extraordinarily cost-effective and green option that, when effective, can activate and revitalize streets when used according to original intent. Solely residential mixed-use spaces, however, do not always fulfill the same benefits.