

A MODEST PROPOSAL

L41

Michael Katz, Janet Corne

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

23m² (248 sq ft)

It started with a well-designed kitchen. 'In most subcompact units,' says architect Michael Katz, 'the kitchen is the first thing to be compromised. But we started with a fully equipped, highly functional kitchen...and from there, the rest easily followed.' But Katz's minimal, high-design, modular home has a lot more to its credit than a satisfying culinary capacity within a compact structure. As a model of living small, the L41 was meant to address far bigger concerns. Katz says that he felt that the question to ask was not just 'How small can a unit be?', but 'How small can a unit be before it ceases to be delightful?' He also seemed to be asking how it could help save the planet, provide shelter for its poorest inhabitants, and help promote a more equitable society.

The L41 is a stackable housing solution that draws inspiration from architect Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 at Expo 67 in Montreal, an arrangement of 354 cubes that formed 148 residences. The basic L41 is a single, studio-style habitat intended for one person or a couple, but it can be expanded to accommodate a small family. Katz also hopes that it will be produced in quantities to form higher-density housing in flexible apartment buildings along the lines of Habitat 67, but with a far greater degree of sustainability in its materials and services. It addresses the issues of global warming and pollution, and those closer to home by making use of local wood that was in need of harvesting, due to damage from pine-beetle infestation. Katz has spent forty years designing objects (including the first universal folding mobile keyboard), as well as large building projects, and his passion for what is ultimately humane and environmentally sound reaches far beyond this little house.

The name 'L41' is meant to be read as 'all for one', and also suggests the inverse: 'one for all'. The house is intended as a step towards a global housing solution. 'Affordability, mass-production, quality, high design and sustainability is the L41 housing manifesto,' says Katz. And he cites Article 25 of the UN Charter of Human Rights, that 'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his family' as proof that such a solution is not only a delight, it is an imperative. The ability to mass-produce houses, he argues, is crucial to meeting the very basic need for human shelter. Hence the prefabricated design here: the L41 consists of three parts, delivered by flatbed truck, that can be fully assembled in one day.

Yet its high-minded aims are not what first strikes visitors to the L41. Rather, it makes them aware that doing away with excess space is not a barrier to comfort, or even a bit of luxury. Finishes are to a high standard throughout. The kitchen is fitted with high-quality appliances, as Katz felt it was important to spend more on things that would last longer: 'Good-quality appliances with long, low-service lives trump planned obsolescence and appliances in landfills.' The glazed end wall and large living room window open the house to its surroundings, make it feel more spacious and allow for the luxury of unimpeded natural light. Narrower vertical windows at the kitchen end provide some privacy and variation, keeping the interior from feeling like a uniform cube. The external cladding is zinc, chosen for its robustness and low-energy production. The L41 may be a small step towards the global good, but it is a giant leap towards better housing, and yes, it is a delight.





The plan consists of an ample, U-shaped kitchen with a dining bar, a living area that doubles up as a bedroom with pull-out bed, a desk area and a bathroom. There is also a small, covered terrace. The many storage closets and drawers have a streamlined, handleless design, which makes each area feel more spacious.

The walls are constructed with cross-laminated timber, made by pressing sheets of softwood together at right angles to create a 'super-ply' that is both structurally sound and load-bearing, thus eliminating the need for materials that contribute to CO2 emissions.

The use of CLT could have greater implications for Katz's home province of British Columbia, where an estimated 1 billion cubic metres (35 billion cubic feet) of forest has been killed by pine beetle, and has to be milled in the next decade before it becomes unusable.

