



# Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Design & Permitting Resource Sheet

A general guide for obtaining a permit to construct an ADU

San Francisco Department of Building Inspection

Technical Services | Permit Services Division

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## DESIGN AN ADU THAT MEETS CITY CODES

Accessory dwelling units (ADU) must meet City requirements that keep buildings safe and neighborhoods livable.

Homeowners often hire an architect or designer to create the plans.

## WHAT TO DO

After you decide to build an ADU, you must create architectural plans for your ADU. Then we review your plans to make sure they follow the rules in the building, fire and planning codes.

Follow these guidelines to create ADU plans that meet City codes. Refer to the building code on [sfdbi.org](https://www.sfdbi.org) for specific code requirements.

See the ADU program comparison from SF Planning for specifics at [sfplanning.org/accessory-dwelling-units](https://www.sfplanning.org/accessory-dwelling-units).

## When you must hire a design professional

We require that a licensed design professional sign and stamp most ADU plans. We do not require a licensed design professional in these cases: single-family homes with wood-framed construction (Type V construction) that are less than:

- 2 stories and basement in height
- 25 feet wide between bearing walls
- 25 feet high

Multiple-unit dwellings containing less than 5 dwelling units of wood construction that are no more than 1 story and basement in height.

Read more in Information Sheet G-01 on the [sfdbi.org](https://www.sfdbi.org) website.

## Common limitations

- ADUs must be a minimum of 220 sq ft and have a minimum 7.5-ft ceiling height.
- Bathrooms, kitchens, storage rooms, and laundry rooms may have a minimum 7-ft ceiling height.
- You must provide adequate natural light and ventilation to the unit.
- Your ADU must meet fire safety requirements for escape and rescue and exits.

For multi-family homes with 3 or more units, you may be required to add a fire alarm and sprinkler system to your ground floor for Local program ADUs.

## Number of ADUs you can build at your property

Under State Law, you can build 1 ADU or junior ADU (JADU) in single-family homes.

You may build more than 1 ADU in some instances and under our Local ADU program.

If you want to build more than 1 ADU, see more about State and Local ADU programs on the SF Planning website at [sfplanning.org/accessory-dwelling-units](https://www.sfplanning.org/accessory-dwelling-units).

## UNIT REQUIREMENTS

### Entrances, Exits, and Fire Dept. Access

Your ADU must have its own entrance. The person living in your ADU cannot be required to enter through another unit. The units can share a common foyer or hallway.

Most ADUs require two exits for fire safety. The exit path must be 36 inches wide. The clear opening of all doors must be 32 inches wide, which is usually a 34 inch-wide door panel.

In some cases, there must also be a 5-ft clear access path for the fire department to rescue people when there's an emergency.

### Ceiling heights

In hallways and living and sleeping areas, the minimum ceiling height is 7.5 ft. In other rooms (like the bathroom and kitchen), the minimum ceiling height is 7 ft.

### Rooms and sleeping areas

Your unit must have:

- At least one room that's more than 120 sq ft
- A designated sleeping area

Habitable rooms, like living rooms and bedrooms, must be:

- At least 70 sq ft
- At least 7 ft in any dimension

Kitchens must have a pathway of at least 3 ft between the counters and the wall and a 4-burner stove.

### Natural light

All living spaces in the City must have natural light, also called exposure. The City uses the term glazing to refer to glass in windows, doors, or other fixed openings that let natural light into a building. Habitable rooms, excluding kitchens, home offices and media rooms, must have glazing that's at least 8% of the floor area.

### Ventilation

Habitable rooms must have natural ventilation from a window that's at least 4% of the floor area. An exterior door also counts for the ventilation requirement. If that's not possible, you must provide a mechanical ventilation system. All bathrooms must have an exhaust fan.

## UTILITIES

**Water:** Single-family homes adding an ADU do not usually need additional water capacity. If you are remodeling the primary unit as well, there may be additional water capacity costs. If you are adding 1 unit to a 2-unit building, you may be required to add a sprinkler system to comply with fire safety. This will likely require additional water capacity.

**Electrical:** Independent wiring is required for each unit. Occupants shall have ready access to all overcurrent devices protecting the conductors supplying that occupancy. New detached, free-standing ADUs cannot have new gas appliances.

**Gas:** If the ADU has gas appliances, the property's gas lines will need to be extended to the new unit. Gas meter installation must be coordinated with Pacific Gas and Electric free-standing ADUs need to be all-electric.

**Meters:** All gas and electric meters must meet PG&E requirements. If the meter box is in the exit passageway, it must be 1-hour fire rated, and it cannot block the minimum width of the exit passageway.

## FIRE SAFETY

The City makes sure all construction keeps our residents safe. One effective way to do that is to make sure that if fires start, they can't spread. These rules keep our buildings and City safe.

### Construction

Walls that separate the ADU from a garage or an existing unit and walls on the property line must be 1-hour fire rated.

If your building has more than 3 existing units, is more than 2 stories, and is made with an unprotected wood frame (type VB construction), new ADUs on the first floor must be built with a protected wood frame, also called type VA construction.

### Escape and Rescue openings

Every bedroom or sleeping area must have an emergency escape and rescue opening. This can be a door or a window that ideally leads to the public way, or there needs to be an area of safe dispersal at least 25 feet away. The window must:

- Be at least 5.7 sq ft
- Be at least 24 inches high and 20 inches wide
- Be less than 44 inches above the floor
- Open freely so someone can climb out without keys or tools to open

### Exit and Egress Paths

The farthest point in the unit to the public way must be less than 125 ft.

The exits and egress paths to the new units also must use protected wood frame construction, also called VA.

### Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors

Smoke detectors, also called smoke alarms, and carbon monoxide detectors are required in every residential building. They are required:

- In the hallway outside a sleeping area
- In each sleeping area
- On every floor even if there isn't a sleeping area

They can be installed after construction and do not need to be included on the plans prepared for the City.

### Fire alarms and sprinklers

A fire alarm is not a smoke detector. It can be manually or automatically activated. The alarm is much louder than a smoke detector and often has a visual light to notify residents of an active fire. You may be required to install a manual fire alarm system throughout the building and sprinklers on the ground floor of the building if:

- Your building has 3 or more units, and
- A sleeping room faces the rear yard, and
- Your rear yard is less than 50 ft deep.

If your project requires fire alarms or sprinklers, they must be noted on the plans prepared for the City.

If you are uncertain if this applies to your project, check with the Fire Department at [sf-fire.org/services/plan-check](http://sf-fire.org/services/plan-check).

## BUILDING AN ADU MAY CHANGE YOUR OCCUPANCY CODES

Architects, contractors, and City inspectors use rules defined by the California Building Code to make sure our buildings are safe.

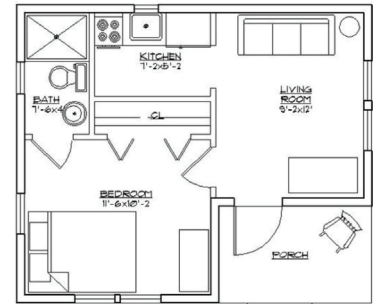
These rules define the occupancy codes of our homes and buildings. Each occupancy code has different requirements.

- R-2 is the occupancy code for residential buildings with 3 or more units.
- R-3 is the occupancy code for a single-family home or a building with 2 or fewer units.

If you have a single-family home and are adding 1 unit, your property will remain an R-3.

If you have a duplex or a 2-unit building and you are adding 1 ADU under the State or Hybrid ADU programs, your property may remain an R-3.

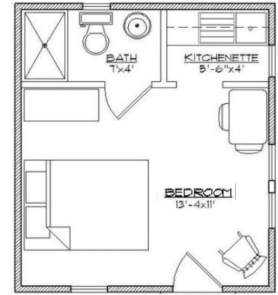
In San Francisco, the Fire Department is responsible for R-2 buildings. So there are additional fire safety rules you will have to follow if you are adding a unit to a 2-unit building. We will take you through these requirements in the Fire Safety section.



## STUDIOS

If your ADU will be a studio unit (also called an efficiency dwelling unit), it must follow all of the other requirements. It also must have:

- A living room with a minimum 220 sq ft of floor area (and an additional 100 sq ft for each occupant more than 2)
- A closet
- A kitchen area with a sink, cooking appliance, fridge, and counter at least 30 inches wide
- A separate bathroom with toilet and bathtub or shower
- In a studio, the floor area of the entire living and sleeping space is the basis for the light and ventilation requirements.



If a bedroom is not fully enclosed, the adjacent room can count towards the light and ventilation requirements. The shared wall must be 50% open and unobstructed. The area must be at least 25 sq ft or 10% of the floor area of the room served.

## GREEN BUILDING REQUIREMENTS

All construction in San Francisco must follow state and local law for energy-efficient buildings. Your construction will need an energy inspection, as well as other building inspections to verify that your electrical, mechanical, and plumbing work meets the code.

## STRUCTURAL WORK

You will need to provide structural drawings and calculations created by a structural engineer if:

- Your property is under the Soft Story Ordinance
- You're doing structural work that will change your building's gravity load carrying elements
- You're doing voluntary seismic upgrades

## PROPERTY REQUIREMENTS

For property requirements regarding parking, setbacks, garbage totes, and open space, refer to the Planning Department. Your property must have 1 street tree per every 20 feet of frontage that borders the public right of way.

## RESOURCES

For more information or to check the status of your permit application, visit [sfdbi.org](http://sfdbi.org)

**Additional support is available at:**  
Dept of Building Inspection ADU guidance:  
[techQ@sfgov.org](mailto:techQ@sfgov.org)

SF Planning: [cpc.adu@sfgov.org](mailto:cpc.adu@sfgov.org)  
SF Fire Dept: [sf-fire.org](http://sf-fire.org)

