



When Student Housing Demand Grows, Unconventional Solutions Arise

What are the fastest ways to produce more housing options when enrollment increases? Here are some ideas from The Bradley Projects.

As enrollment continues to expand, student housing developers are having a hard time keeping up with demand. Preleasing for the 2024-2025 school year is already exceeding last year's record highs, according to the latest [student housing report](#) from Yardi Matrix. As of January, preleasing at Yardi 200 schools hit 54.5 percent, marking a 7.1 percent year-over-year jump.

Navigating through supply imbalances and rising construction costs, developers, academic institutions and designers are working together across the country to find rapid ways to deliver more housing for students. Jared Bradley, founder of **The Bradley Projects**, has identified several unconventional solutions to expedite project completions without neglecting students' comfort and needs.

Through its three branches—architecture, construction and development—The Bradley Projects has been delivering [solution-based projects](#) across the Nashville, Tenn., student housing market. After partnering with Fisk University, a local Historically Black College and University, the company completed a \$4 million student housing community made of shipping containers, meant to swiftly cater to the institution's increasing need for housing. Here's what Bradley told *Multi-Housing News* about this project and how academic institutions are responding to growing demand for on-campus housing.



Jared Bradley believes that thought-provoking design can help with growing student housing demand. *Image courtesy of The Bradley Projects*

How has student housing changed lately and what trends are most visible in the Nashville market?

Bradley: The student housing space is constantly evolving to meet the needs of colleges and universities, as best demonstrated by the pandemic. We're witnessing a trend of students [moving back onto campus](#), creating a much higher demand for housing.

In the past 20 years, private, for-profit developers would purchase real estate surrounding campuses to create student housing in an ideal location. However, escalating land values have made this approach more challenging and cost-prohibitive, especially in cities like Nashville, where real estate [costs have significantly increased](#). Consequently, with the growing surge in student enrollments, most institutions are experiencing a much higher increase in on-campus students than they're accustomed to.



In addition to working on research laboratories, the main library, a fitness center and the renovation of Jubilee Hall at Fisk University, Jared Bradley and his partner Scott Delano's construction company Certified Construction Services is currently building a new on-campus residential hall. *Photo by Ford Photographs, courtesy of The Bradley Projects*

How are academic institutions responding to this growing demand for on-campus housing? What are some challenges that come with this acute need for housing?

Bradley: This overwhelming need for on-campus housing presents both challenges and opportunities for universities. In direct response to these conditions, there's a trend toward exploring unconventional construction methods to expedite project completion and optimize space usage—pursuing methods these universities may not have considered otherwise.

On the more traditional front, we're seeing many institutions invest in [rehabilitating older dorms](#). In undertaking these projects, we bring these out-of-date structures back up to meet the standards of students today, enhancing their overall living experience. This process involves

updating fixtures, tiles and paint to improve comfort and aesthetics, ensuring that these dormitories remain functional for current and future students. This approach has its benefits in producing student housing options faster than a ground-up project. The downside is that this method typically doesn't yield a new source with additional beds to their housing inventory.

Are there any specific design methods employed throughout the renovation process of old dorms?

Bradley: I firmly believe that natural light can completely transform any space. Controlled light not only has a slew of wellness benefits for occupants, but it also opens up a space, transforming cramped, tight rooms into larger, more open spaces.

For example, our team applied this concept to 608 Main, a multifamily project in Clarksville, Tenn., that's directly adjacent to Austin Peay State University's campus. By designing the units with windows nearly as big as their floorplans, you would never guess the square footage is as small as it was. A good view and some sunshine make a world of a difference if you can find ways to incorporate that into existing structures.

How difficult is it to go beyond cosmetic updates when rehabilitating older dorm rooms?

Bradley: The structural side of things certainly presents an array of possible challenges when it comes to rehabilitating older dorms—our team has a lot of experience with [renovation and maintenance work](#) on the construction side.

For many older university buildings, their original structure and engineering make larger, more apprehensive modifications difficult. For instance, if you're looking to combine smaller units into singular, larger spaces, that existing infrastructure typically impedes such flexibility that is more prevalent in newer facilities. Additionally, these dormitory structures usually utilize very durable, yet cost-efficient materials, such as concrete blocks, that can be a challenge to reorganize and repurpose due to the way they're embedded in the structure. Modifying these buildings can be challenging and cost-prohibitive, which is why we're witnessing many being demolished after running the course of their life expectancy.

Could you provide concrete examples of unconventional ideas that you utilized to cater to the rising demand? Please share details about some of your more progressive ideas in the space.

Bradley: Recently, we stepped out of our typical realm of design with a residential project for Fisk University. Through thoughtful collaboration with the university and its partners, we landed on what we refer to as the 'container dorms'—shipping containers that have been carefully designed into micro units to house students.

These dorms each accommodate two people with a small kitchen, bathroom and study area. While this option certainly speeds up the overall construction process, we have found that there is often the right place and time for projects like this, and those places and times are very limited and unique. Despite their compact size, these units provide [comfort and convenience](#), catering to the evolving expectations of today's and tomorrow's students. The primary difference is the scale and size of the rooms, just slightly smaller, to hit the minimum requirements for student living.



The 98-unit community made of 40-foot long shipping containers will help Fisk University rapidly add more housing units. All photos by Ford Photographs, courtesy of The Bradley Projects

How do you balance modern amenities with space constraints when designing for small footprints?

Bradley: It's all about focusing on every single element needed for dwelling—minimizing things, but also incorporating multipurpose spaces that address more than one need. For example, in the container dorms, we incorporated a small kitchen containing storage that can house books or other supplies. You think of the minimal need, then maximize what you have using programmatic elements.

Sustainability is a top concern for young generations. What role do sustainability and energy efficiency play in your approach to student housing design and renovations?

Bradley: Sustainability is one part conceptual, the other technical. Our biggest focus is on creating walkable communities—establishing a place for residents to live, work, and play without having to commute. This is especially pertinent on campuses: making sure projects can support the lifestyle of students by ensuring groceries, entertainment, housing, and health care are all within an accessible distance. Our team is implementing this approach to Nashville's Jefferson Street corridor, bringing the campuses of Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee State University together by establishing the crucial elements of a walkable community.

On the technical side of things, our team is not only constantly implementing new code requirements, but making an effort to [incorporate sustainability](#) in our standard practices, which are constantly evolving.

In what way would you say your company is different?

Bradley: We believe in architecture [grounded in the human experience](#), resulting in projects that make tangible, purposeful impacts on the communities they exist within. We treat architecture as art—creating beautiful, functional living spaces that positively contribute to a campus as a whole. Student housing is unique in that you can directly influence someone's educational experience and our goal is to create spaces that form communities not only on campus but throughout the surrounding area as well.

Tell us more about your plans for Nashville. Do you intend to expand your student housing footprint this year?

Bradley: Our team is constantly seeking partnerships that create a tangible impact on the development of healthy, thriving communities in Nashville. We're working on various projects with and around universities that cater directly to students and their needs, and we hope to have the opportunity to continue doing so.

We're constantly evaluating our multifamily projects as well, seeing how we may be able to make them more student-friendly and campus-forward on Jefferson Street and beyond. On a more national scale, I think we'll continue to see a rise in student housing projects, especially those that blend the edges of campus with more urban areas, to create a healthier ecosystem of community.

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