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Apartment hunting in Silicon Valley moves online

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With rents falling and vacancies rising in Silicon Valley, finding decent new rental digs may be easier, especially for those who take their hunt for an apartment online.

Last month, nearly 47 million people searched the Web for rental and for-sale housing nationwide, 13 percent more searches than in September 2008, according to comScore Media Metrix. And many in the rental-housing-search business expect online traffic to keep increasing as more people turn to the Web for information and the troubled economy keeps homes out of the reach of many.

"The unemployment rate directly correlates to whether people are going to step into a mortgage and buy a home," said Mark Moran, vice president of marketing for MyNewPlace.com, a nationwide rental search site whose offices are in San Francisco.

Just as all types of consumer Web sites have become more sophisticated in recent years, the Web-based search for rentals is not just about scrolling through Craigslist pages anymore. Dozens of sites vie for renters' attention, from eBay-owned Rent.com to a smaller contender like HotPads.com. Rental sites have also begun offering the latest in social-media widgets, allowing users to share the nitty-gritty details of their apartment-search with their friends. ("Should I take the one with the pool, or with the washer-dryer?")

Search sites fall into a variety

of categories.

- Sites that specialize in large apartment complexes. Several free sites boast thousands and thousands of listings for apartments in larger complexes nationwide. These sites make their money off the large property management companies (Archstone or Avalon Bay, for example) that post listings there, and include Apartments.com, ApartmentGuide.com, ForRent.com, HotPads.com, MyNewPlace.com, and Rent.com. These sites often include multiple photos, addresses, maps and floor plans, lists of amenities and neighborhood information. Some sites are adding listings from smaller landlords to appeal to a wider range of renters.

site. HotPads features "heat maps" that can show things like the per capita income or median age in the area the user is searching.

In some cases, users also will find ways to share their apartment choices with others via Facebook (from [Apartments.com](#), HotPads or MyNewPlace), be able to download rental-search apps for their mobile phones, or get a \$100 reward card (from [Rent.com](#).) if they lease an apartment found on the

- [Craigslist.org](#). The site, which is free, features an ever-changing landscape of listings mostly posted by smaller landlords and property managers. Listings may or may not include photos, complete property descriptions, addresses or maps. At least two free sites, [HousingMaps.com](#) and [MapsKrieg.com](#), are mashups that take Craigslist rental postings and display them on Google Maps. Users are still left to ponder the sometimes idiosyncratic spelling and photos landlords post, but at least on these sites they can picture where the property is on a map.
- Newspaper sites. Numerous newspaper Web sites also allow users to search for listing they have, including at [MercuryNews.com](#), which has a searchable database that includes photos and allows users to browse options and compare. Users can forward links to friends, and review the advertiser.
- Apartment finder services. These sites, where renters pay for access to a company's database of listings, also tend to draw from smaller landlords. Locally, for example, Bay Rentals is a finder service that's been around since the 1980s ([www.bayrentals.com](#)), and charges renters \$98 for 90 days of access to its listings; in the Los Angeles area, Westside Rentals ([www.westsiderentals.com](#)) is alive and well.

What users will find if they search on various sites is that the number of listings for a given area can vary hugely depending on the Web site. In addition, on the big-property listings sites, "featured listings" that appear on the top of the results page often are not in the same town that the renter is interested in.

On a recent day, for example, a search for apartments in Campbell turned up four complexes with available units on [ForRent.com](#) and [Move.com](#) (where each of the four mysteriously appeared twice), 10 on [Apartments.com](#), 14 on [Rent.com](#), and 21 on [MyNewPlace.com](#). (And a number of the sites do annoying things like announcing, "63 results for Campbell," and then returning a list in which two-thirds of the apartments are really in San Jose.)

So it could benefit renters to try using more than one site, not only to see which has the right type of apartments and houses for their preferences, but also just to choose the site whose bells and whistles, or lack thereof, make the search for a new home as painless as possible.

After all, as the economy has struggled, more apartments stand vacant as people double-up in rentals to share expenses, said Peggy Abkemeier, president of [Rent.com](#). That means the searching is good right now for renters. The occupancy rate dropped to 94.5 percent in the third quarter from 95.6 percent a year earlier in large apartment complexes in Santa Clara County, according to RealFacts, a Marin County company. Average monthly rent in such complexes fell 10 percent to \$1,536.

"People are looking around more before they are making their decision," she said, with users viewing more properties and e-mailing more property managers before they sign a lease.

A few years ago, she said, renters were more likely to be looking for luxuries like hardwood floors and walk-in closets, but today's customer has "a bigger focus on the basic amenities" like washing machines, air conditioning and paid utilities.

And in this day and age, there are a whole lot of tricked-out Web sites and mobile apps that can tell them all about those basic items.

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