

DESIGN for LIFESTYLES



By Donald J. Meeks, AIA

A more sophisticated renter is changing the face of multifamily design. This renter seeks convenience, state-of-the-art amenities, and luxury interiors commonly found in single-family homes. Multifamily developers can successfully appeal to this renter-by-choice market that is willing to pay for exceptional floor plan design and five-star luxuries.

At the same time, challenges created by the rising cost of land, diminishing land resources, and an increase in redevelopment districts are forcing developers from California to New Jersey to deal with smaller sites and look for new ways to achieve higher densities.

These factors have produced a clear-cut trend across America. Architects and developers are planning new communities that will create a sense of place for

McCaslin Development Co. will raze three dilapidated motels and construct the Medical Center Apartments in Houston. Construction of the 378 luxury units and six-level above-grade garage is scheduled to begin early this year.

residents and their families. Both urban and suburban communities continue to include neo-traditional planning elements that encourage social gatherings



Alexan CityCenter in Englewood, Colo., is a complete redevelopment of a large shopping mall into a mixed-use urban center. The community, which was developed by Trammell Crow Residential, includes residential, retail, entertainment, open space, civic, and cultural arts uses.

and pedestrian traffic. Pedestrian-only promenades, enhanced by detailed streetscapes, make communities walkable, while town centers and village squares serve as focal points. Urban parks and open green spaces also are located throughout the development and help reduce the dense feel, while further promoting a sense of community.

The densities of these communities will typically range from 40 to 70 dwelling units per acre, with the average size of the site ranging from two acres to six acres. Through careful planning, architects and developers have the opportunity to achieve these densities using four-story wood frame construction instead of turning to mid- or high-rise construction.

The current trend and most cost-effective approach to wood frame for high-density is a concept that uses an above-grade, multi-level parking structure, which is strategically hidden from



street view. This attractive alternative requires less time to construct than subterranean parking because apartments can be built simultaneously with the garage. As a result, units are ready for occupancy months sooner. In addition, an above-grade structure provides residents with the opportunity to park on the

level on which they live and access their homes without the use of stairs or an elevator. This added convenience allows developers to attain premium rents.

Finally, regardless of urban or suburban site location, developers are taking advantage of opportunities to turn high-density projects into diversified

NEW TRENDS FOR LUXURY COMMUNITIES



mixed-use communities by including retail and commercial components such as restaurants, coffee shops, dry cleaners, and convenience stores into the ground level of the community. The integration of these mixed-uses not only adds vibrant flavor to the community but also provides an added bonus for the luxury renter by creating a comfortable and convenient place for residential living, working, shopping, and dining.

Unit Design Trends

In an effort to meet the diverse needs of today's high-end luxury renter, developers are incorporating variety and flexibility into the unit mix by replacing traditional floor plans with an eclectic combination of products that include open flats, townhomes, lofts, and live/work units.

The Quarters at Memorial, MULTIFAMILY EXECUTIVE'S 2002 Resort/Luxury Project of the Year, is a prime example. The Quarters site plan consists of 380 luxury units with 252 flats, 72 lofts, and 56 townhome units. The Quarters, which is located in Houston, offers 39 distinct one- to three-bedroom floor plans that range in size from 700 square feet to 2,000 square feet. This mix, which allows for various front-entry stoops, balconies, and window conditions,

combined with the inclusion of a pedestrian-only brick-paved community walk-through known as "Main Street," invigorates the community.

Across the country, new trends in exterior and interior design are emerging. Today's apartments are much more contemporary. Exterior designs are unique and feature vibrant color schemes, eclectic detailing, commercial windows, and the creative use of different materials such as industrial metal siding and concrete block.

Units are larger in size and designed with custom home luxuries such as dramatic entries with rotundas and angled walls with built-in art niches. Ceiling heights have increased from 9 feet and now vary from 10 feet to 18 feet, and windows are now oversized and more abundant. The flooring found in today's units combines hardwood or stained concrete with carpet, while countertops feature granite or marble finishes.

There has been a great demand in recent years for lofts that create nostalgia without sacrificing modern amenities. Loft units today are often refined, creating a distinction between traditional lofts and soft lofts. Soft lofts continue to possess many of the same loft features, yet are less industrial than in the past. They include minimal exposed duct

The Quarters at Memorial in Houston, is an example of how developers are using open flats, townhomes, lofts, and live/work units to appeal to a variety of potential residents. Developed by McCaslin Development, this community offers 380 units, ranging in size from 707 square feet to 1,960 square feet.

work, stained concrete flooring, large glass transom windows, and track lighting. The walls can be angled, or designed as sliding bypass walls, to separate the bedroom from the living areas. Also noticeably different are the kitchens, which feature modern islands and cabinets that are either open, or designed with glass doors instead of raised panels.

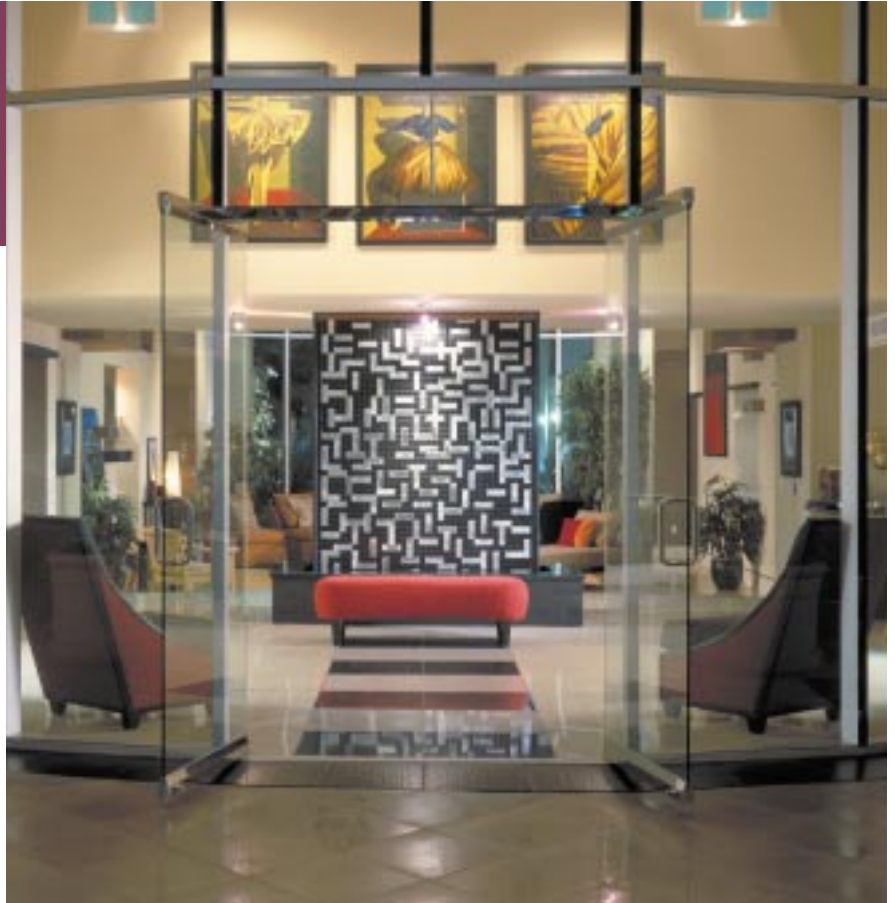
The live/work unit is a new trend rapidly gaining popularity with residents looking for convenience. These live/work units feature ground floor commercial space with street frontage and an individual retail address. Private one- or two-car garages offer direct access to the unit and are located in the rear. Live/work studios are typically 800 square feet to 1,500 square feet and feature ceiling heights that range from 9 feet to 19 feet with full height windows. They include several unique interior characteristics such as stained concrete floors, iron staircases,



Legacy Partners' Plaza at the Arboretum in Santa Monica, Calif., is a seven story mixed-use project with 341 apartment units and 10,850 square feet of retail space. Residents can enjoy a private club room with plenty of seating options.

and gourmet kitchens designed with granite countertops. Moreover, live/work units feature high-tech computer libraries, complete with desks, and multiple data and phone connections.

Finally, contemporary townhomes are an attractive component in versatile multifamily communities. These redesigned plans feature step-up stoops, porches, and patios and have the ability to stack themselves in high-density situations. Today's newer townhomes range in size from 1,300 square feet to 2,000 square feet and emphasize openness with two-story volume in the living and dining areas. In addition, a variety of options, such as a mezzanine, further maximizes height. Typically, these plans also offer one- or two-car private garages, which are hidden from street view.



Village at Museum Park in San Jose, Calif., developed by Legacy Partners, was integrated into an existing community of commercial, industrial, retail, and single-family homes. All 117 units have one- or two-car direct access garages, which are hidden from street view.



Five-Star Amenities

Driven by the increased expectations of the high-end renter, amenities have taken on a fresh new role. With greater importance being placed on lifestyle, flexibility, and convenience, today's services and amenities have been upgraded and enhanced to become a vital part of every multifamily community. Traditional game rooms and weight rooms have been replaced by elaborate clubhouses that offer quality fitness and aerobics studios with personal trainers, cinemas with stadium seating, high-tech Internet cafes, coffee bars, gourmet kitchens for cooking classes or parties, a full-service concierge, and a wide array of retail services.

Within the home, innovative, state-of-the-art amenities also have evolved. In addition to offering multiple phone, cable, and data connections, today's technologically advanced units integrate high-speed Internet lines into the kitchen and dining areas, providing an added convenience for the growing number of renters that work from home.

Looking Ahead

The look and feel of multifamily communities has changed. An increased sophistication of today's luxury renter, combined with rising land prices and the recent proliferation of wood-frame apartments across the country, has emphasized the need for developers to separate their product. The focus has shifted to lifestyle and variety. Developers willing to think outside traditional design in addressing these issues will add value to their property and will successfully attract the renter by choice willing to pay premium rental rates. ■

Donald J. Meeks is chairman of Meeks + Partners Co., an architecture and land planning firm. He can be reached at dmeeks@meekspartners.com.

