

COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

IN DEPTH: CONSTRUCTION, DEVELOPMENT & DESIGN

From the February 7, 2003 print edition

Living Space

New materials, technology focus of multifamily design

William Andrews

Today's multifamily tenant and property design look vastly different than even a few years ago. Seeking the attributes of a single-family home, yet the convenience of multifamily living, this new face of the market – ranging from the young professionals to the increasingly active aging population – challenges the multifamily developer with a new set of demands and characteristics.

Further, the trend toward themed communities sheds new light on the importance of design-to-project success. Architects are being asked to look beyond just creating living space to mastering designs that are affordable, yet build a lifestyle. Fortunately, a balance of new building products, acceptance of single-family and commercial construction techniques, as well as integration of marketing themes into the design process allows for the creation of a successful property in today's multifamily market.

Taking cues from other markets

Since today's multifamily dweller represents nearly every social and monetary circle, it is no wonder that efficient design and construction are coming into play now more than ever. Gone are the days when apartments or condos were simply a myriad of rooms with little regard to open space and architectural creativity.

Rather, multifamily consumers have grown accustomed to advancements in other markets and expect these attributes to be applied to their condo or apartment space as well. For example, though open floor plans and great rooms have been the norm for some time in single-family homes, these concepts are just making their way to the multifamily market. Today's consumer is definitely looking for larger and more functional living space.

Technology, product advances

Fortunately, a variety of new materials, as well as acceptance of proven products and techniques used in other markets, has allowed designers to respond to today's consumer. Engineered floor systems – durable, knot-free dimensional products comprised of fast-growing lumber combined with composite materials – accommodate the consumer's desire for more open living spaces. Such systems allow designers to affordably and easily span multifamily units.

This also holds true for other engineered wood products, which reduce the amount of steel needed, thereby creating a savings in terms of cost and schedule.

Similarly, a variety of products are increasing the durability, longevity and appearance of multifamily units. For example, there has been a growing acceptance of using cement fiber siding and trim. Although the product must be painted, it does not expand or contract, offering owners a long lifespan.

Plastic-based systems also are topping the list of accepted building products. The increased use of plastic piping has allowed for more cost-effective heating and cooling packages and has been shown to last longer than alternative materials. Vinyl siding is now available in greater lengths in a wide range of finishes and textures – allowing for fewer joints and better aesthetics.

Unique selling proposition

Yet another shift in the industry is merely a change in mindset. Today's architect must be cognizant of the growing trend of themed communities in order to respond with effective design elements that support the sales process. Swimming pools, fitness centers and clubhouses are not enough in today's marketplace. Rather, today's savvy and e-crazed consumer seeks high-speed Internet connection and business centers as a design feature.

Design evolution

To successfully respond to the changing market, owners and architects must partner earlier in the design process to maximize efficiencies while creating the optimal environment for the theme. One suggestion is creating a consistent design for the kitchen and bathroom areas. Beyond merely saving dollars and time in the design and construction process, this step also provides a real savings in terms of long-term maintenance by creating familiarity with the products for maintenance crews.

Yet another example of using uniformity of design is interchanging products, such as trim and window details.

By selecting a few different standard products, construction is simplified, products can be purchased in bulk, yet there is still an opportunity for architectural interest.

Multifamily developers will need to respond to the growing marketplace with smart, efficient and tech-savvy communities. The architectural community also will carry this burden, yet are presented with the opportunity for ingenuity and creativity like never before.

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