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September 2008

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Luxurious outdoor amenities attract residents and generate attractive returns on investment

By Teresa O'Dea Hein, Managing Editor

Nowadays, more and more forward-thinking developers and property managers are duplicating suburban landscaped amenities, but putting them on a rooftop or terrace at an urban development. Catchy names like "sky parks," "sky terraces" and "sky clubs" reinforce the experience. While having any outdoor amenity space at an urban multifamily property is a treat, some companies are taking it to even higher levels and creating resort-like environments with rooftop swimming pools, hot tubs, lawns, shrubbery, fireplaces and barbecue areas.

As more people are living in smaller spaces in multifamily communities, they are almost forced to be more social, making a community's common spaces even more important, notes Jonathan Holtzman, CEO and chairman of Village Green Companies, Farmington Hills, Mich. "You have to create a mood for your multifamily communities."

In fact, the specific amenities that impact resident satisfaction the most are recreational facilities, social activities and the swimming pool, says David C. Smith, vice president in Kingsley Associates' Atlanta office.

"I don't think we're in the apartment business—instead, Village Green thinks it's in the hospitality business," explains Holtzman. He admires progressive, state-of-the-art boutique hotels like the Delano, Shore Club, Mondrian and W for the atmosphere and environments they create and wants to emulate that. "In a Village Green apartment, people just stay longer than at a hotel," Holtzman says. "I think this all relates to recognizing that the renter is a customer, not a second-class citizen to a homeowner. So our job is to provide a lifestyle, hence our motto: Lifestyle for Rent."

Village Green is using this approach both at existing communities as well as on new construction. To that end, Village Green keeps a landscape architect and interior merchandiser on staff. Recently, the company brought this trendy boutique hotel look out to a suburban Chicago apartment community when it added a colorful clubhouse and pool area.

Holtzman says that while it is admittedly more expensive to design, install and maintain these outdoor amenities, the investments pay off, noting that the firm's downtown Chicago high rise, which features a rooftop amenity area, is garnering the area's highest occupancy and rent per square foot. "It's clear that the consumer is willing to pay higher rents if they get better amenities like well-designed outdoor spaces."

Consider the demographics and location to create the appropriate social atmosphere, experts advise. "You can't build the same things that were built in the 1960s and '70s," Holtzman points out. "Different times call for different designs. You have to address the new attitudes of renters who want something fresh. That's why Apple and JetBlue were so successful—they introduced unique new offerings and created brands."

Nowadays, you have to appeal to emotions and attitudes, Holtzman believes. For example, swinging benches and rocking chairs evoke the feeling of a vacation cottage while hammocks and palm plants remind people of island getaways.

Holtzman and others recommend using contrasting materials, and varying the types of furniture. For example, poolside at a boutique hotel, you might see double chaise lounges and platform lounges in addition to the usual resort furniture. Furthermore, Holtzman suggests, use an assortment of furniture, in a couple of different colors, patterns and materials such as wood and modern metals. And add graphics, too.

Plus, he notes, it's very important to incorporate sounds, such as water features and outdoor speakers tuned to satellite radio, "which can be very inexpensive."

"Design around the concept of ADD—the opposite of minimalism," Holtzman says. "With MTV and iPod Shuffles, our society is now used to receiving a wide variety of stimuli and signals at once." At the same time, he advises including space that is passive and quiet, too, such as a Zen garden.

"This is an age of consumerism, so you can either be a commodity—and the Internet creates commodities—or you can differentiate yourself by creating a better lifestyle. A lifestyle will command a premium," Holtzman concludes.

"What succeeds, I think, is having several, small spaces with multiple uses," says Holtzman, which enables one group of residents to barbecue, for example, while another enjoys the hot tub and others watch a film on an outdoor movie screen.

Rob Pressman, a principal with landscape architect TGP Inc. and a specialist in multifamily developments, agrees. Pressman, based in Encino, Calif., likes to design outdoor areas so that they have a sense of discovery, dividing them into discrete "rooms," as opposed to one large open space. "That unexpected space helps market the community."

For example, at Mura, a luxury condominium by Pulte Homes, private outdoor space designed by TGP offers residents



From the top: The stone fireplace at Puente Homes' Mura condos in Los Angeles anchors an outdoor living room, designed by TGP, Encino, Calif. (Courtesy Greg Epstein Photographer) At Village Park of Hoffman Estates in suburban Chicago, Village Green created a resort-like look at a new pool. New York's Cetra/Ruddy included an 11th-floor lawn terrace in its design for 77 Hudson, a 48-story K. Hovnanian Homes condo in Jersey City, N.J. (Courtesy Rooster Design Group) On Chicago's MDA City Apartments, Village Green's 24th-floor Sky Park offers a hot tub, pool, bbq area and movies.

a place to stroll within the safe confines of this gated community in the Arts District of downtown Los Angeles. The main pedestrian circulation spine at Mura is paved with interlocking concrete pavers in four colors in a repeating pattern. This promenade ties together three large courtyards and a pool area, all located on the podium level, one floor above the street. The largest of three podium-level courtyards is comprised of three outdoor rooms: a foyer furnished with benches that shares a double-sided fountain with the adjacent dining room that is fitted out with barbecue grills, granite countertop, tables and chairs, and a living room with comfortable furnishings around a fireplace.

At another TGP project now being entitled, the common open space consists of courtyards of varying sizes, each with its own character and function, such as a "sculpture room" and a "meadow." The central recreation area with a 75-ft.-long pool includes a BBQ terrace and a fireplace terrace overlooking the street.

Pressman points out that while the menu of possible outdoor amenities is pretty much the same across the board, "it's really the level of materials and design that elevates the look of a community."

Plant materials have to be chosen with appropriate and similar water requirements, Pressman points out. Having tall, mature plant material from day one is an important consideration in the category of luxury, he adds, because it makes spaces feel comfortable from the beginning. He's using more native and drought-tolerant plants such as grasses like flax and purple fountain grass, which also adds a looser, more textured look.

Combining contrasting types of stone surfaces, such as textured rocks and smooth cobbles, is now popular, Pressman reports, as is the use of steel and other metals for a contemporary look.

And if you can't afford expensive hardscapes, Pressman says that higher-end furniture and accessories can enhance the look of an outdoor space.

### Maintenance

Landscape lighting can make a dramatic impact, Pressman points out. However, with all elements, maintenance requirements also need to be taken into account, he warns. "The level of maintenance can really determine how luxurious a property feels." Plants need to be pruned, cobbles and edging strips need to be swept clean of wind-blown material, hardscape may need re-sealing, and fountains need to be kept working and not turned into planters. "Typically, operations people are only on the property during the day, so they don't see when


landscape lighting is not working or is askew," Pressman says. "Maintenance requires a commitment from the property manager."

Outdoor spaces also house organized social activities that residents find valuable. The Gotham Organization Inc. focuses on creating unique events for its residents at the several apartment buildings it owns and operates in Manhattan and uses rooftop "sky terraces" for yoga classes, open-air concerts and spa events, among other things. "These outdoor spaces are very important and part of our marketing approach, whether they offer great views or peaceful spots for relaxing—they're part of the Wow! factor," explains Katherine Sabroff, vice president of marketing and operations for the Gotham Organization. "It's a huge selling point; it certainly enters into a potential resident's decision-making process to rent here. For sure, it'll resonate with people," Sabroff believes. "These spaces are the epicenter of the social life of the property."

For The Residences at Dockside, a luxury waterfront condominium community in Philadelphia, the DePaul Group included a 4,100-sq.-ft. clubroom terrace that looks out over the river to the city skyline and Ben Franklin Bridge. To get a fresh perspective on design, the developer recently commissioned two landscape architecture students from Temple University Ambler who helped revamp terraces for two model units.

Victoria Teschner, director of sales and marketing for the 242-unit Residences at Dockside, says, "Luxury landscaping is just one of those important details that makes a big difference. It shows condo owners that we care and demonstrates the overall first-class quality in all of our properties."

Teschner advises, "Work off your surroundings and your property's architecture. Cater your design to your residents and the time of day when they will spend the most time in these areas (whether daytime or nighttime). When planning, keep in mind all four seasons and how you would like your terrace to look during each of them. Also, we have found it especially helpful to use native plants, because we know they thrive in our location."

Moreover, Teschner adds, "Stay simple with the plants you use and your overall design. If the design is too extravagant or the plants installed require too much upkeep, it will be much more maintenance than any property manager can handle. Use strong, simple designs that complement the overall feeling of the property." 

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