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Dense Development

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Multifamily Design Trends: Building in Dense Environments

Multifamily design trends in urban core communities are moving toward vertical properties that attract residents through cutting-edge amenities, convenient access to the surrounding area and transportation, and socialization events.

By IvyLee Rosario



The Ludland Trail project is emblematic of current multifamily design trends. The community will integrate open space, health and wellness amenities, food and beverage, and more than 900 residential units developed along a half-mile segment of a 6-mile public trail in Miami. The project was designed by Lake Flato Architects.

Not so long ago, renting was all about securing the biggest space for your money. With Millennials, Gen Z and Baby Boomers transforming the multifamily sector, architects and developers started to pay more attention to their needs—compromising on size for the sake of incorporating other qualities. In response to increasing urban populations and other demographic shifts, multifamily design trends are reimagining residential towers as future-proof properties. Compact footprints are replacing large, sprawling communities in renters' preferences.

“Those in these denser, crowded cities want to stay in the city. Whether it’s younger or older generations, they are now both looking for the same qualities: access to transportation, amenities such as restaurants, medical, retail and parks,” said Yolanda Cole, owner & senior principal, Hickok Cole Architects. “There are new models to address different types of demographics that cater to everyone’s needs in a dense environment.”

Dallas, Washington, D.C., and Miami are among the cities that are experiencing population growth at rates ranging from 0.8 percent to 1.8 percent annually, according to Census Bureau estimates published in April. “The increasing populations are creating an increasing need for diversified living options in urban areas, without the ability to create more developable land to meet these demands,” explained Peter Chmielewski, city president, LMC. “Therefore, residential design has gone more vertical in urban areas, with several super-tall skyscrapers that formerly only housed office space.”

STAY CONNECTED

Increasing urban core densities have created a market for placemaking—designing a master-planned community that will not only feature housing units but also service additional needs such as grocery shopping, necessity-based retail like hair salons and dry cleaners, as well as entertainment attractions like movie theaters and food and beverage options.

“There’s an opportunity here to look at master planning and think about public space around buildings and other experiments, inhabiting spaces that weren’t meant to be pedestrian-dominated,” noted Andrew Burnett, senior principal of design at consulting firm Stantec.

The challenge is creating a sense of community and belonging in such a vast project. While residents want more smart tech in their apartments, they want more human interaction outside of it, and this is what developers and designers are focusing on in populated urban districts. Much of the intangible value of a home in a high-density community exists beyond its four walls.

“The relevance of the property will be dictated by the unique programs offered and locating projects adjacent to public spaces, such as parks and trail systems, where people can extend their lifestyle outside of the building. That is a key element for long-term investment,” said Vincent Signorello, founder & principal, Scout Capital.

Along with interaction among a community’s residents, connecting to one’s surroundings in a dense district is also driving a number of multifamily design trends. “It’s along the ground plane that most of us experience our environment and create a personal connection to the place. So, as you build in more dense environments, space at the ground becomes limited, and the design needs to respond in a variety of ways,” added Burnett. The solution for such activated spaces is, again, to look up. “Our experience and interaction with communities needs to extend vertically while contributing to the quality of life in a dense environment.”

THE BIG SQUEEZE

Other pressing issues are land availability and cost. As developable infill locations are scarce, those coveted parcels come with a hefty price tag. That prompted designers to come up with more compact projects and efficient planning. “People love to have a piece of the outdoors, so we try to design a lot of balconies, and if not that, shared outdoor terraces and rooftops,” said Cole.

In some cases, zoning restricts building heights, presenting architects with a formidable challenge. Minimizing the lowered ceiling areas for mechanical and plumbing systems, or using more glass to expand views horizontally, are design strategies that help units feel larger, she added.

Flexibility is another major element of dense design and another shaper of multifamily design trends. Understanding the nature of the changes to a neighborhood plays a vital role in keeping a property relevant in a city with an influx of new residents. Modular construction is one effective way to address the need for adaptability. “These pieces can be built in factory environments, shipped and installed where you need them,” added Cole. “These can be made into beautiful spaces and, most importantly, you can control the quality more in a factory than on a construction site. It’s all about rethinking the ways in which buildings are put together.”

Social factors, too, influence the different forms of housing in dense areas. The markets that are seeing population growth are also facing a proportionate widening of the affordable housing shortage. Solutions include micro-units, workforce housing and co-living.

“There is a lot of Class A luxury product that only meets the demand of a small percentage of the population,” said Chmielewski. “We need to do a better job of creating living and housing opportunities for a larger percentage of the population, both in terms of demographic and income level.”