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Making First Impressions Last

Developers invest in well-designed building lobbies because form and function can equal dollars and cents

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You never get a second chance to make a first impression so in these days of slowing sales, the design and operation of building lobbies takes on even more importance. Furthermore, industry observers agree that multifamily tenants and buyers have become more sophisticated, creating a demand for higher quality finishes and design in spaces that work more efficiently. "I think that renters and buyers today expect a higher level of quality in buildings," notes Jeff Wikstrom, president of SilverStone Communities' Colorado Division.

Another challenge is the fact that lobbies have to serve a wide range of functions, from welcoming visitors and potential residents to helping market a building as well as providing security, accepting deliveries, providing short-term storage and offering easy access for mailboxes and recycling as well as to behind-the-scenes systems like fire protection measures. Some lobbies also serve as gathering places for owners/tenants, too, and even offer wireless Internet connections. Others showcase a developer's environmental and/or community focus.

Jim Atkins, a principal of The South Group, a partnership of two Portland, Ore.-based developers (Williams & Dame and Gerding/Edlen) building several high-rise condominiums in the South Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, recently moved into Elleven, the first building they've completed. As both developer and condo owner of Elleven, Atkins has a unique perspective on what works and what doesn't. A big lesson learned, he reports, is that you can never put too much storage space in a lobby. "We have a package room right off the mailbox area to hold boxes, dry cleaning and other types of deliveries. It is also equipped with utility outlets for refrigerators and freezers for temporary storage of deliveries for residents."

In this case, Atkins says Elleven is the first ground-up for-sale project in the downtown Los Angeles neighborhood in 25 years and there was no grocery store nearby (a Ralph's supermarket is slated to open this summer), so those refrigerators have come in handy for on-line orders.

"While a lobby does not count toward net saleable square footage, so we don't directly receive income from it from a revenue point of view, it is your front door, a living room and a visitor's first exposure to the building," Atkins points out, so it has to have a presence. Plus, "some of our best salespeople are our existing customers, so if that lobby space isn't something they're proud of when guests come over, you'll lose out," he warns. Since the developer plans to apply for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver or Gold certification on this project, easy access to the recycling room was an important consideration.



Amir Khamneipur Design combined limestone and black granite to create a striking pattern for the lobby floor at the elegant, distinctive Trump Plaza Jersey City, N.J., slated to feature the state's tallest residential towers.

An engineer by background, Atkins appreciates all the details needed for good design. To make sure that practical management issues were taken into account during the design phase, he explains that they hired an experienced homeowners association (HOA) manager to provide feedback. For example, the HOA suggested adding more space for janitorial supplies and resident deliveries. While the look of the lobby attendant's desk is sleek and clean, it contains plenty of hidden storage areas for needed items like two-way radios that need to be recharged. Space was also laid out in order to comply with ADA accessibility issues.

At the same time, the lobby is also designed with security issues in mind, notes Amy Arroyo, founder of Amy Arroyo Interior Design and this project's designer. "At first, some people complained about the homeowners association fees, which include the lobby attendant, but having 24-hour security is an advantage in this city." Now, she adds, residents appreciate this benefit.

The overall concept of Elleven's lobby is to be a sanctuary for the people who live there, Arroyo explains. To that end, she selected a sheetrock product that comes textured in a wave-like pattern. The flowing look is carried down onto the floors with a durable Italian river rock. A sound system was included so that light background music could brighten the space. Over the past five years, Arroyo says she has

noticed lobby design moving more toward a hospitality feel.

Elleven's architect, Ankrom Moisan Associated Architects, has designed a lot of for-sale residential and, as a result, Arroyo says, "They understand the balancing act between form and function, and cost and aesthetics."

The lobby has to stand up to a lot of traffic from residents, visitors, contractors and wheeled moving carts. Practical, cleanable surfaces were a factor for flooring and elevator cabs, especially since about 30 to 40 percent of owners have dogs—"we didn't think as many people would own dogs (as I do)," explains Atkins.

Practicality was also a factor at the elegant, stylish Trump Plaza Jersey City, N.J. Amir Khamneipur Design combined limestone and black granite to create a striking pattern on the lobby floor, and his custom furniture designs enhance the image of the sales center and two-story lobby for what will be the two tallest residential towers in New Jersey, at 50 and 55 stories, respectively, now under construction on the waterfront and being developed by Metro Homes LLC and The Trump Organization. At the same time, the sales center/model apartment will be operating for about two years, so the Manhattan-based Khamneipur had to keep high traffic in mind and he specified high-quality, stain-resistant and wear-resistant leathers.

"Sometimes, the aesthetic is there in a building but materials and quality aren't. Now, as the condominium market has become tighter, developers want something [that] will stand up with time but is impressive—impressive materials, details and quality," Khamneipur points out. "Just one chair in the corner doesn't make an impact on a consumer paying high prices. I want a lobby that will match or exceed the quality of my apartments."

Khamneipur says, "There are so many condos out there—each building we do has a particular vision." At this property, he was going for a "monumental, tailored aesthetic with the atmosphere of a private mansion—less of a feeling of a public space."

Edward Baquero, managing partner of Coalco, a developer headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland with offices in New York and Moscow, notes that newer building lobbies "could be used as a refuge from your home, as well as a continuation of a highly stylized residence. I think peoples' taste and preferences have evolved—especially in the last 10 years; their living environments are more sophisticated and they want both design and function. We want people to feel at home even in transitional spaces like common areas."

At Element, Coalco's 35-story condominium tower now under construction on Manhattan's West 59th St., the lobby even contains a full bathroom, of equal quality to that of upstairs condos, for use by guests/residents on their way



Above: Specially commissioned artwork, WiFi and background music create a dynamic atmosphere that encourages people to spend time in the lobby of Avalon at Mission Bay in San Francisco. (Photo by David Wakely Photography)

Top right: Elleven's lobby in downtown Los Angeles was designed as a sanctuary from the city while also providing space for get-togethers. Bottom right: The lobby and common areas at Denver's Park One Hundred were reconfigured and remodeled to be more welcoming and open.

in or out of the building (with access supervised by the concierge). The concierge desk is also equipped with an elevator call button, a timesaving convenience, especially appreciated when people have their arms full.

In his design for Element's interior spaces, Rick Livingstone, principal of the New York-based firm, Period, also aimed for more of a residential feeling and scale with an updated 1930s aesthetic "rather than a predictable commercial look; things got too contemporary. What I'm now seeing is a number of buildings with clean, simple lines but textural details and a trend toward adding color."

Livingstone gave a lot of thought to pattern and color, using a teal-blue fabric and brown carpeting that's a custom wool produced in a durable yet softer weave for the lobby of this 198-unit high rise. He also specified taupe-colored ceramic tile with a textural quality for better slip resistance and taupe grout lines so the color would wear well. Grand seating spaces include a 9-ft.-long sofa and matching chairs. For Livingstone, whose interior design

firm also offers full architectural services, "art needs to be a part of the architecture," so he selected graphics and vertical metallic panels that "waterfall off the wall" onto carpet that echoes that same feeling in its texture and three bands of color.

As soon as Chicago-based SilverStone Communities, a national developer specializing in for-sale residential communities, acquired its first multi-family property in Denver last March, it reconfigured and renovated all the interior common spaces at Park One Hundred because company executives view common areas as an important sales tool.

Wikstrom of SilverStone Communities explains that the extensive remodel on this condo conversion, built in 1984, relocated all the common spaces up to the front of the Uptown building. "We tried to create gathering spots within the common areas and better integrate a variety of functions within the one large space." For example, instead of relegating mailboxes to the dark corridor where they were once located, the developer moved them out into a location near where the coffee bar is so that they became more of an area where residents can meet. In fact, SilverStone even invested in a Starbucks-brand coffee machine which, while more expensive, connotes quality, Wikstrom believes.

The complete lobby renovation, which took almost five months, features a new conference room, business center and entertainment area that includes a wet bar, big-screen TV and WiFi. The outdoor pool is also visible from there. The developer even added a gift-wrapping station, stocked with paper and ribbon, within the business center.

"All those areas really draw a lot of people; these spaces work and people use them, instead of the empty clubhouse and fitness areas seen in some other buildings," Wikstrom says. "What it also does is it creates a terrific marketing path," he adds. "Prospective buyers come through there, see a sense of community and envision themselves living there and using those spaces. It's a gigantic silent seller. That visualization is an important part of the sales/leasing process."

Designer Kelly Gillette, principal of Tableaux Interior Design, Englewood, Colo., combined a sense of activity



with a feeling of relaxation for these spaces. While Gillette chose commercial-grade carpet for the lobby and related common areas, she still selected one that at the same time had more of a residential feel. Replacing fluorescent lights with warmer light fixtures and a greater variety of lighting also created a different mood.

"I like to use bright, dynamic colors that pop and offer some contrast," Gillette points out. "I want people to walk in and say, 'wow,' so I try to push the limits on color." However, she advises, it is harder to use bright colors in higher-end properties. For Park 100, Gillette chose a tertiary color scheme with muted shades of bright colors, such as rust, eggplant and olive.

Besides being showplaces themselves for the buildings for which they serve as welcome mats and gatekeepers, some lobbies are also used to spotlight specific artwork. For example, San Francisco's recently opened, 313-unit Avalon at Mission Bay features artwork from Creativity Explored, a local organization that works with developmentally disabled adults. The architecture and interior design firm of Tom Eliot Fisch, also based in the Bay Area, equipped the lobby with double-sided structures to display eight paintings from Creativity Explored's gallery. To maintain a fresh look, these pieces will be rotated periodically with two other sets of eight paintings, all of which were created especially for this lobby. Meg Spriggs, development director at Avalon-Bay Communities Inc., explains, "We were trying to create a warm atmosphere, complete with WiFi, background music and good lighting, where residents would be comfortable and want to spend time." **MHN**

To see more lobbies, visit www.multi-housingnews.com (Click on "more" in Current Issue.)



Lobby Design Trends

- Greater use of natural light;
- Design and materials (furniture, fabric, carpeting and stone) with more of a residential feel (and less like commercial-grade products) with the flair and scale of a resort or boutique hotel lobby;
- Aesthetics that meld commercial with more of a residential feel;
- Natural materials like slate, stone, glass and metal, softened with greenery;
- Interactive spaces;
- Splashes of color beginning to be interspersed with ever-popular neutrals;
- Multiple seating areas;
- A warming trend as modern décor becomes less stark than earlier industrial/contemporary designs;
- Updated traditional design using, for example, wood with metal accents and more offset, asymmetrical approaches.