

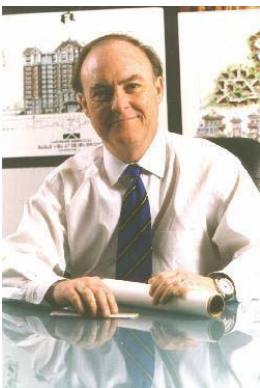


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By Lynne Viccaro, Editor-in-Chief

Humphreys Designs M-F with Single-Family-Feel

Harrelson Eyes Growth, Niche Housing Opportunities



Mark Humphreys, Humphreys & Partners Architects CEO

New York - When it comes to apartment designs, plain-looking vanilla boxes where residents dwell until they can afford a house are becoming a thing of the past. Today's renters-by-choice consider their apartments their homes, not some transient dwelling. According to Mark Humphreys, CEO of Humphreys & Partners Architects in Dallas, the apartment industry had been churning out the same type of product for 30 years, but the renters-by-choice of the 1990s have fueled a kind of revolution, demanding single-family amenities in their multifamily dwellings.

MHN asked leading multifamily design experts how future apartment layouts would build upon the innovations of the 1990s. Participating in this roundtable discussion are: Robert A. Koch, Fugleberg Koch Architects, Winter Park, Fla.; John Guest and Jerrold Beeler, BGO Architects, Dallas; Mark Humphreys, Humphreys & Partners Architects, Dallas; and Sanford Steinberg, The Steinberg Collaborative, Houston.

Q. What would you consider the most significant design and/or product innovation for the apartment industry in the 1990s?

A. Koch: Garages. Historically, they haven't been considered an element in multifamily design. Now there's hardly a project, even in tax credit deals, that doesn't include plans for garages. This speaks of the diversity and demand in the market. Garages have demonstrated demand at every economic level.

Even within the garage designs there are distinctions. Garages belonging to a blue-collar resident are very different than those used by a white-collar resident. In affordable housing, garages are primarily used to house work tools or work trucks, are not likely to be attached and are more likely to be occupied by men. Women demand more for attached garages. The executive-type renter uses a garage more for the protection of toys: jet skis, boats, motorcycles, etc. These garages are designed for comfort, convenience and safety-more so for the protection of a person rather than property. This is an important rental incentive during winter months.

In addition, there's the issue of accessibility as it relates to fair housing. Two-car garages need to be wide enough to accommodate a disabled resident's vehicle. I fully anticipate this as a trend. All of this, I might add, shows that apartments are no longer shelters of necessity. Residents are trying to replicate the quality of life in the home, and a garage is simply a sampling of that trend.

Humphreys: Without a doubt, direct-access [apartments] with garages have been the most significant design change. There's extremely high demand for two-car garages. We also keep in mind that over 50 percent of renters are female who consider the direct access garage invaluable for security reasons, as well as convenience. They'll pay much more for it-I think that the security factor has been underestimated. Gates and alarm systems don't give as much security if you are walking across 500 yards of open parking lots. Coupled with garages are the computer locations within the apartment units. The PC is part of our life, and we had to change our plans to accommodate them.



Q. Building on this, what's next for 2000 and beyond?

A. Humphreys: I have an interesting thought. I'd like to build on that idea of building homes for rent. Not only build apartments that look like single-family homes, but go a step further—design single-family detached homes for rent in 2000. You don't have to fight a zoning battle as long as costs are in line and the multifamily development returns are there. People will pay more for our two-car garage units—some 20 percent over market. We can deliver a single-family product with a pool and clubhouse, but for rent. Can get 7-8 units approved and give renters what they want. Lately, there's been unbelievable opposition to apartment building in community. The majority of the objections have to do with the number of children being brought into the already-overloaded school system. Thanks to a 1991 law, you cannot discriminate against families, so a number of tax credit projects are being developed into school system that is already overloaded.

A. Guest: The renter-by-choice is going to do things a little different than the Big House. We're going to see some single-family, detached for-rent communities. This has come about for two reasons. First, we're back to the 80s in the concept that many communities are saying we've overbuilt. What we're going to do is develop bigger and bolder communities with more amenities. Today's renter also does not want attached walls, so this would be the chance to live in your own home that's totally maintained for a year at a time, and you can leave your money with a stockbroker and not lose money on real estate.

Steinberg: What I see happening is that we're going to use different materials for the construction, itself. We won't just use a stickframe; they'll be more use of concrete and steel for better living environment. With stickframe construction, you can hear everything your neighbors are doing. With concrete and steel, there is zero sound transition.

Q. How has the rising income levels of today's renters-by-choice affected apartment design?

Steinberg: Apartment design is becoming more specialized and single-family driven. In the 90s, apartments were designed with nine-foot ceilings. Now, it's 10-foot ceilings. We'll be designing basically a box space where a resident can finish his or herself. They'll be a kitchen and bathrooms, and the resident can determine the rest of the space. We don't have the technology to treat residential space like commercial space, where a tenant can put up his or her own walls. The resident can, however, pick a standard package resident, or bring in their own interior designer. Branding was the concept of the 90s. For 2000, it's changing to individualism.

Humphreys: In regard to that, take off your apartment brain, set it aside, and put on your house brain. Apartments now need to be in competition with homes. The 1980s product with an attached garage is not in competition with homes. For example, most of our competition is still designing closets as they always have done—walk-in, five feet deep. Probably most significant design element that we're doing that beat the competition is designing bigger closets—some 12 feet deep and seven to eight feet wide.

Island kitchens are another example. In affordable housing units, there are 2 x 4 island kitchens. In the more higher-end apartments, some are as nice as those seen in a million-dollar home with multilevels on the islands made of tile and granite, very much like a home.

Q. How has the urban resurgence trend affected use of space in apartment design?

A. Beeler: The "soft loft" is coming into its own, replacing traditional multifamily design. It has some subtle divisions, no door, but it's obvious that it is a bedroom. A "hard loft" by contrast, is all open space in one huge room, with a kitchen tucked into the corner, minimal bath and minimal closet space. To get this "warehouse feel" in new construction is hard to do, but the influence of hard loft is moving toward the softer loft. A soft loft does not necessarily have rooms with doors, but rather architecturally defined spaces. In new construction, this will be a major product, especially in the south, in next 2-4 years.

Koch: Bonus space—that's what is becoming a dominant issue. Residents need a space in addition to prescribed rooms. For example, some are taking porches, putting a glass wall around them, and it becomes a garden room or a media center. There's a strong desire to personalize space with functional use that can be very different for different occupants.

Steinberg: What I'm seeing is that a successful urban project has to be mixed use. In the 1980s, the idea of mixed use was retail on the bottom floors with residential space on top. Now, urban mixed-use projects are working as mini-cities, with retail, commercial and residential all in one space, where a person can be self-sufficient.

Q. What particular product/innovation do you feel is going to be prevalent in future apartment construction?

A. Steinberg: Mixed-use product. There's going to be a lot more. Mid-rise, four to eight stories, even in the suburban locations. Multifamily units are going to be designed around a common space—not just an outdoor courtyard, but an interior common space. Gathering space is becoming more important. I like to use the example of Monica's apartment on the show "Friends"—there's always one person's place where we all get together. The group of friends together in one community in scattered gathering rooms, rather than one club room, creates a secondary family for the residents.



Beeler: Common Areas. It was very common to build a recreation space taking up 3,000-6000 sq. feet. We now have one project in plan, in a community in Indiana, that includes a 10,000-sq. ft., mini theatre, not just a room with a television in it, a gymnasium, a display kitchen and a breakfast room. These separate common areas are going to allow the complex to get between 10-20 cent per square foot increases over market rate rents.

Koch: Color. We're finding in the Southern parts of the country some historically done projects in the framework of a color scheme in California subdivision model. We're looking to "villageify" our rental communities, using color to segment the community into different parts-defining by color, rather than numbers. Paint ends up being the only distinction. At every turn, the building changes color, creating smiles and traffic. Colors are a regional issue: Retro colors and more festive colors are found in resort markets, like Las Vegas and Florida, while vegetable colors are more prevalent in traditional markets like Savannah.

Guest: Sound insulation. There are a lot of innovative new techniques to cut down on noise. Thermo Tech 2000 is an insulation that goes in the wall and ceiling and provides sound control that exceeds anything we've seen. This issue has been identified as an apartment dweller's number-one concern. It wasn't addressed for years because no one really complained loud enough about it-people just accepted it as a way of life.

Humphreys: Single-family-feel. It's prevalent in our office now, and will be prevalent in the future, no doubt. Products that will be prevalent, seeing, networking inside the computer space, moving toward having more than one computer in a home, Security is going to be very high. For women it's the number one concern. Going to start seeing more individuality in apartment projects. In the past, it was the construction companies that have been in control. That's the way its always been done. "That's over now." It's the extras that will set these apartments apart.

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About Humphreys & Partners Architects

Humphreys & Partners Architects, L.P. is a Dallas-based, full service architectural firm specializing in the multi-family housing market. The firm is currently designing hi-rise, mid-rise, luxury, moderate, senior, student, mixed-use, tax credit, and low-income multifamily projects in markets across the country. The firm also has considerable expertise in the design of hotels and single family housing.

Humphreys & Partners Architects, L.P. has won numerous local and national awards, including Pillars of the Industry, Best in American Living, Builder's Choice, Gold Nugget and Aurora.