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Single-family bliss in designer apartments

Dallas (January 29, 2006) -- There's no place like home - and renters love it. Apartment's communities that boast separate entrances, private garages, gourmet kitchens with Corian or granite countertops, and fancy baths - not to mention concierge services - have become extraordinarily popular among well-to-do renters. These are apartments that look and feel more like single-family houses - a design trend that started two to three years ago. Renters who are older, more educated and more affluent are influencing the changes. Over the last two years, households earning \$50,000 or more represented the fastest-growing segment of apartment renters - many of whom are turning their backs on the quiet suburban life for a chance to experience urban excitement.

More than a fad

Look for the trend to accelerate during the next decade, according to architects Mark Humphreys of Humphreys & Partners Architects in Dallas and Sanford Steinberg of Steinberg Collaborative in Houston. The two, who have designed numerous single-family-style rental communities, shared their insights with delegates at the National Apartment Association's June 22-24 convention in New Orleans. "What we're seeing today is developers creating neighborhoods, not apartments," said Humphrey.

Here's what in store for property owners - and renters:

Exterior: Individual units are getting their own color scheme or architectural detailing to break up the bulkiness of garden and mid-rise apartments. The apartments now resemble large homes rather than the bulky structures they really are. The illusion is reinforced with separate entrances and one- or two-car garages with direct access into the apartment.

Floor plans: Apartments are no longer Cracker Jack boxes. Some luxury apartments top 3,000 square feet - larger than both the 1,065 square feet for the average apartment and 2,190 square feet for the average single family home. But most range from 1,500 to 2,000 square feet - plenty of room for high 10-foot ceilings, arched entryways, lots of light and open space and rooms that flow easily from one to the others.

Gourmet kitchens that truly impress

Interior: The influence of single-family homes is especially apparent in bathrooms and kitchens. Bathrooms have separate showers and (often oversized Jacuzzi-style) tubs, large windows and corner vanities. "And don't be afraid to put closets in your bathroom," said Steinberg.

Once fashionable bleached floors and white-washed cabinetry are out after just a few years, and darker woods such as maple are in for floors and kitchen cabinetry. Windows over the kitchen sink are the latest. So are island preparation areas. A 3-by-5-foot kitchen island is the norm for an upscale apartment, though one new apartment community in Pittsburgh, Pa. came with a monstrous 8-by-8-foot island comfortable enough for chef Paul Prudhomme's New Orleans-style cooking.

That kitchen island was in one of the several hundred "Big House" designed by Humphreys' firm. The "Big House" apartments typically ranged up to 2,000 feet with two-car garages, two eating areas, entry archway and three bedrooms - a master bedroom suite located a world away from bedrooms on the other side of the apartment.



Amenities superior to single-family homes

A "must-have" is space where a rental housing resident can easily operate a computer. **"Not having a computer area is like not having an eating area," said Humphrey. And walk-in closets are truly walk in - from 11 to 14 feet deep. "A three-foot-deep walk-in closet isn't going to work for a married couple," he said.**

This all fits in with recent analyses conducted by the National Multifamily Housing Council. In many cases, these newer apartment communities offer superior amenities and services than found in single-family homes, according to council vice president Kim Duty.

"Apartments have added new amenities, new technologies, new designs and a renewed emphasis on customer service in order to attract new classes of renters," Duty told a National Association of Real Estate Editors conference held in conjunction with NAA.

"For today's time-pressed residents, a single call to the on-site concierge can arrange babysitting, housekeeping, pet care, grocery shopping or a night on the town. High-speed Internet access, on-site fitness centers, cyber cafes, business centers, movie screening rooms, billiards rooms and more make apartment living very competitive with single-family living," she said.

Luxury apartments with upscale amenities are more expensive to build. Depending on land costs, Steinberg said apartments up to four stories can run \$55 to \$60 a square foot and midrise five- to eight-story projects can reach \$75 to \$85 a square foot. That's considerably higher than the \$45 to \$50 a square foot developers generally spend to build for the average apartment.

"You're going to spend the extra money because you'll get higher rents," said Steinberg.

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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.