

Design to Appeal

The Elements of Attractive Floor Plans

[by Mark Humphreys]

Does a floor plan make a big difference? If a plan is a one-bedroom and one-bath unit at 700 square feet or a two-bedroom and two-bath unit at 950 square feet, you could argue that these are normal sizes and there isn't much else you can do plan-wise. They are about the same, right? No.

There are many things that make an attractive floor plan:

- It looks bigger than it is.
- It's not dark — lots of windows and natural light.
- Good use of space.
- Innovative ideas.
- Great details.
- Surface materials.

If a plan is 1,200 square feet and it just has larger spaces, say an extra 200 square feet on a 1,000-square-foot plan, that alone doesn't make it more attractive.

Many apartment properties have good or attractive floor plans by default. They have seven or 10 plans, but there isn't a progression of sizes or more spaces (closets) or items (islands) for the larger size plans. In other words, some developments' plans are just whatever square feet they come out to.

For example, there are two one-bedrooms — one is 780 square feet and the other is 765 square feet because that's how it happened to work out. That's bad planning. That's how one plan becomes an attractive plan by default — it is just better than the other choice.

To become an attractive plan by design, there would have to be a price point difference. With the price point difference, you would get something better. An example would be a 650-square-foot plan that has nice room sizes, but may

lack a computer space and a dining room. The larger 750-square-foot plan may have a dining area and a computer space. Given these factors, both plans become attractive to the buyer/renter by design. The prospective resident may only be able to afford the 650 square foot plan, or the extra spaces (dining and computer areas) may be important and the price isn't, so both plans are attractive.

This is true with larger plans, too. A



larger two-bedroom becomes attractive if you offer another one "by design" which is smaller (which costs less) and has less features than the larger two-bedroom. The larger unit offers more features, such as a large closet and an eat-in kitchen as well as a dining room.

You are hitting two markets: one person who is looking to rent for an affordable price and another who is a "renter by choice" (a person who can afford a single-family home, but chooses to rent).

Many apartment developers don't realize that times have changed. You can't use

the same old apartment plans that have no appeal. There are several features that can make a plan attractive:

1. Today's plans need walk-in closets. Some can be eight feet wide and 14 feet deep.
2. Double sinks in the master bath are a must in larger plans.
3. Islands in kitchens have been accepted well and recent surveys show the resident will pay an additional \$30 per month for an island. This is an item that costs less than \$500 to add and has less than a two-year payback.
4. Probably the biggest item in a plan is the computer space. But computer spaces have to enhance the plan, not detract from it. Many people have added the computer space, knowing it is a new trend, but they have not considered its location or whether the space is visible from formal or sleeping areas (which is a no-no).
5. Garages attached to a plan make it attractive — not just visually, but financially as well. Several recent properties had plans with attached garages and identical plans with no garages. The plans with the attached garages were 100 percent leased.

The ones without garages were 85 percent leased.

The garage plans also were getting 11 cents to 40 cents more per square foot. This advantage costs \$3,500 to \$5,000 for a one- or two-car garage, respectively. That is a one and a half-year to three-year payback.

6. Another innovation that makes a plan attractive today is a two-car garage vs. a one-car garage. There is such a limited number of two-car garage rentals that this truly makes a plan competitive with a single-family home.



The Points at Adams Ridge in Mars, Pa., offers residents more spaces and items from which to choose. Islands in kitchens and computer spaces are popular additions with a quick return on the investment.

design ■ perspective

7. Upgrades are the latest trend; this includes doing actual finish upgrades while the units are under construction like special flooring, tile and wood. There are several developers using wood floors as a paid upgrade while construction is underway.
 8. Closet systems as an upgrade either in the closet or the garage, as a workbench or potting area.
 9. Painted accent walls as an upgrade can be done at any time and it is relatively inexpensive.
 10. Granite countertops either as a specific area or an island have been very popular.
 11. Pre-wired ceiling speakers added in the ceiling.
- Today, it's not one thing that makes a plan attractive; it's a combination of things. If you walk into a plan that has a wall as the first thing you see and there is very little light, it's not going to feel attractive. Instead, a plan for a foyer space with a lighted art space, and a coffered ceiling in the foyer space with a view to large windows, is much more inviting.

The rest of the formula includes closing the lease, which means finding what communities are missing, like a computer space and breakfast area in addition to a dining room. The one thing that always loses the sale, but is the cheapest to provide, is a large master closet. Remember, if a six-foot-deep closet isn't big enough for you and your spouse's clothes, why would it be big enough for your resident?

What Women Want

Over the years, most apartments have been designed or developed by men. There needs to be strong consideration for the things women look for. Typically, most women want security first and that's why they prefer a second floor unit. Also, women are less interested in having a big screen TV in the clubhouse, but are more interested in the way their home (apartment) looks to their friends when they visit. That is why islands and large closets are so important, as well as attached garages, which are a big security issue. Direct access into the apartment and not being

exposed to outside conditions is very attractive to women. When a woman enters an apartment that she plans to rent, she looks at it through the eyes of her guests. Can you see the kitchen from the entryway? Does the floor plan function well? Can you see a bathroom from a living area? When a man comes to look at a plan, he sees big windows, a guest room, a bar area, and plenty of room for the big TV that's not too far from the kitchen. That's the difference between a man's and a woman's perspective. A man doesn't think seeing a bathroom from a living area is a negative point; he thinks he won't miss any of the football game with this layout. Many developments are unsuccessful because basic plan principles are not followed from the start. If you think in terms of a home, with home amenities and spaces, the resident will see that and rent or buy. ■

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