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Humphreys & Partners is designing The Boardwalk at Town Center, a 345-unit high-density multifamily project in The Woodlands, Texas. Cambridge Development and USAA are developing the project.



CREATING A LASTING IMPRESSION

Texas architecture firms turn to sustainable design elements and enduring concepts for their latest projects.

Haley Shuler

Across Texas, owners and developers are seeking out cutting-edge architecture firms that employ the newest materials, design elements and technologies in their creations. *Texas Real Estate Business* talked with several leading architecture firms to find out what types of designs they are producing and the role sustainable design and functionality play in the planning process.

HUMPHREYS & PARTNERS ARCHITECTS

Based in Dallas, Humphreys & Partners Architects was founded in 1991 and has a staff of nearly 100 architects, designers and land planners. The firm focuses all of its attention on multifamily developments, and varies its designs between a mix of high- and mid-rise complexes, affordable hous-

ing, student housing and senior housing — offering both rental and for-sale units.

According to Humphreys & Partners, the major trend occurring in multifamily right now is condominiums. “Condominiums are very, very hot,” says Mark Humphreys, CEO of Humphreys & Partners. “Of the \$2 billion worth of work we do, approximately \$1.2 billion is condominiums.”

Due to the current rental market in Texas, owning has become the new vogue — but it is a trend that is sure to stick around for some time. “The economics are such that the cost to operate apartments has gone up tremendously because of insurance costs and the like,” says Humphreys. “Rent has not gone up, if anything, it’s gone down — so the margins are

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squeezed.” Although Texas is beginning to see recent trends of higher occupancy in apartment complexes, it is not enough to override the unwavering demand for condominiums. If an owner sells an apartment complex with the way the market is now, then he will probably get about a third of the return he would for a condominium project, according to Humphreys.

Humphreys & Partners is focusing on two new development trends within the condominium market: non-corridor buildings and tunnel form construction. The non-corridor concept creates a feeling of privacy. After getting off the elevator of a non-corridor building, residents enter into a 30-foot long elevator lobby, which is a much smaller, cozier space than the typical elevator lobby. Humphreys & Partners has copyrighted this successful design and branded it HomeRise. The firm’s other new trend is tunnel-form construction, which is a system that allows a project to be built faster — and it’s actually stronger and cheaper, says Humphreys. Humphreys & Partners is using the new concept on a project in Minneapolis, which will be the tallest tunnel-form building in the United States.

In Texas, Humphreys & Partners is working on The Boardwalk at Town Center, a 345-unit high-density multifamily project in The Woodlands, which is a very north suburb of Houston. Cambridge Development and USAA are developing the project, which is being done in a Florida coastal style and is located on the waterway. Additionally, the firm is working on the conversion of an office building to multifamily use on Richmond in Houston. Humphreys & Partners has also designed a high-density complex in downtown Dallas that has an all-wood frame with ground-floor retail. In San Antonio, Humphreys & Partners will soon begin two 20-story condominium towers.

Demographic trends are playing a major role in the popularity of condominiums right now. “The two largest sections of the population are buying condos at a feverish pace,” adds Humphreys. “The baby boomers, the largest population, are buying condos to downsize — and their children, the echo boomers, the second largest group, are buying because they want tangible investments.” The empty-nesters are moving out of their big suburb houses for reasons of efficiency. Young professionals, who have seen only the worst of the stock market and the effect it had on their parents’ assets, are investing their money into real estate, specifically, condominiums.

One hurdle that Humphreys & Partners has faced has been rising construction costs. Humphreys estimates that over the last few years, construction costs have increased 7 percent annually.

Many old apartment buildings in Texas are being razed due to high operating costs and are being replaced with new complexes. The same trend is occurring with office properties, since they have a higher operating cost than multifamily developments. “The trend is going to intown living,” Humphreys says. “I think we are going to see a dynamic change in our urban cities all across the United States.”