

Gen Z Apartment Designs Emphasize Co-Living, Private Personal Space

Practical amenities and sustainability resonate, too.



Hannah Park, Oakland, Calif. Courtesy: Riaz Capital. Photo: Alex Hernandez

When it comes to designing apartments for Gen Z, developers and architects say it helps to think about where they've come from.

Known for being frugal, cohorts of Gen Z—those born from 1997 on—comprise the largest and most diverse generation in American history. With the oldest of them just turning 23 now, they represent the lion's share of new apartment renters for the next 10 to 15 years. But they've been through a lot, from the financial crisis of the late 2000s to the lingering impacts of COVID-19 today.

"They grew up during the Great Recession, and now they're living through a pandemic and its financial impacts," says Elisabeth Post-Marner, principal at New York-based design firm Spacesmith. "They are very practical when it comes to basic needs, and don't have a lot of disposable income for rent."

Designed With Value in Mind

Jonas Bronk, managing director at Phoenix-based Alliance Residential, which operates more than 138,000 units, says when designing product for these renters, value is of the essence.

"Gen Z is extremely savvy and hyper-focused on finding the best deal, which many times comes down to the bottom line," Bronk says. "If we only get a split second to make a first impression, it's imperative to have our value proposition and price messaging perfect."

For that reason, a lot of multifamily developers and designers today are rethinking product designs for Gen Z. While millennials may have demanded luxury amenities—and been willing to pay for them—observers say Gen Z renters are more value driven. They want private space but are open to nontraditional living situations to keep it affordable, and don't need too much of it. Environmental and social causes are important to them, and they easily see through shiny amenities that might look great on a tour, but which they intuitively recognize will result in higher rents.

"They are value-minded and don't want an overly amenitized property with things they won't use, because they ultimately know that they're paying for it," says Rick Jones, president of Atlanta-based Caliber Living, which operates 2,000 units. "The design and space planning need to be practical for them and their environment."

That means fewer pizza ovens, demonstration kitchens, and golf simulators—standouts of the last apartment cycle—and more co-working spaces, back-to-basics fitness centers, and flex-use common areas that can grow and evolve as Gen Z does.

Designing for Co-Living

To meet Gen Z's desire for private space at a price that's affordable, many designers and developers are turning to co-living concepts. Similar to student housing suites where private spaces are rented out around a common kitchen or social area, the units themselves are more diminutive in size. In the larger building, communal kitchens, co-work lounges, or other social gathering areas are available when needed.

"You need to create spaces that promote the idea of sleep in your apartment, and live in the building," says Ashley Yax, vice president of sales and marketing at Southfield, Mich.-based Village Green, which runs approximately 40,000 units. "Ultimately, cost and rental rates are driven by the square footage and unit mix."

Darin Schoolmeester, principal in the Irvine, Calif., office of KTG Architecture + Planning, says increased construction costs and higher rents in recent years, combined with the fact that Gen Z is just starting out, have now coalesced to drive co-living designs.

“Co-living is a big concept we’re seeing in the design phase of what we’re working on right now,” Schoolmeester says. “It isn’t just happening in the urban areas anymore. We’re seeing it in more suburban areas, too.”

At Oakland, Calif.-based Riaz Capital, which operates 1,300 units, the firm is developing what it calls its Affordable By Design (ABD) mid-rise and garden-style co-living spaces to appeal to Gen Z renters struggling to find housing amid California’s affordability crisis.

Core to the concept is a private, five-studio unit that rents by the bed, with a common kitchen and a social area. “The strategy amortizes the full kitchen, entertaining spaces, and washer and dryer among the five revenue-generating studios,” says CEO and founder Riaz Taplin. “That actually helps us reduce our overall construction costs.”



18th & Linden in Oakland, Calif. | Riaz Capital’s Affordable by Design developments are designed with Gen Z and affordability in mind. | Courtesy: Riaz Capital Photo: Alex Hernandez

COVID-19’s Unknown Consequences

At the same time, the impacts of COVID-19 and social distancing may run counter to some co-living concepts.

“The design concepts we’ve been seeing—higher density, co-living, and common amenities—are in direct conflict with what’s happening with COVID-19,” Schoolmeester says. For those reasons, others say increased emphasis on indoor air filtration, easy-to-clean hard surfaces, and antimicrobial finishes, such as bronze and brass instead of stainless steel and chrome, will gain importance.

Eco-Conscious Buildings

With environmental activist Greta Thunberg one of the most recognizable members of Gen Z on the planet, observers say environmentally friendly designs, and green building certifications such as LEED, are also important for these residents.

“An eco-conscious approach has a deep meaning for people coming of age now,” says Al Donovan, senior project manager at the Chelsea, Mass.-based Architectural Team, which specializes in multifamily concepts. “Gen Z expects us to design with wellness and sustainability in mind as a matter of principle.”

For Brantley Basinger, director of development and acquisitions at Atlanta-based Mallory & Evans Development, that means marrying efficient design with environmentally conscious choices.

“The efficient use of space is more important than space,” Basinger says. “We can keep construction costs down and spend more on energy-efficient appliances, low-flow showerheads and toilets, double-paned windows, and insulation, which ultimately result in a better product that’s built to last.”

By creating co-living communities with just enough private space to keep them affordable, flexible and practical amenities, and the environmental features they value, designers and developers can appeal to Gen Z renters today, and tomorrow.