

# Wellness COMES HOME

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Keys to Designing Multifamily  
Environments that Are  
Inspiring, Healthy  
and Functional





**A**s the global pandemic continues into its third year, residents of multifamily properties are more interested than ever before in living environments that support their health and wellness—both physical and emotional. What wellness-focused spaces matter most today? And, as architects and designers, how can we design them to be both inspiring and functional?

A sophisticated understanding of what people are prioritizing—and how thoughtful design selections can support those lifestyle choices—is essential for crafting memorable and engaging multifamily developments. The following are a few key trends and considerations that are currently driving successful interiors:

### **CREATE A MORE HOLISTICALLY SATISFYING WORK-FROM-HOME ENVIRONMENT**

One resoundingly clear takeaway from the pandemic is that the dynamics of work have been permanently altered. People are still navigating an uncertain return to the office or settling into a hybrid situation. Not surprisingly, many designers are hearing from their multifamily developer and owner/operator clients that there is consistently high demand for flexible workspaces that foster productivity—and enjoyment—outside of individual units. If the first phase of the pandemic involved ad hoc design solutions to create functional and safe shared work-from-home spaces, the question now is how to make these spaces not just usable but exceptional.

From a space-planning perspective, certain programmatic trends have proven to be optimal: Small or individual work pods, open benching areas, libraries and quiet zones, and Zoom rooms are all among the key elements of an effective work-from-home amenity program. A thoughtful design approach can ensure that these areas

At **STERLING LOFTS**, a sprawling 4-story jewelry factory artfully converted into 91 mixed-income units, the art program features images of machinery and other artifacts once used in the mill.

PHOTO: JOEL HOWE





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STERLING LOFTS



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STERLING LOFTS



PHOTO: ANDY RYAN

also contribute meaningfully to the wellbeing of their users.

Incorporating principles of biophilic design, for example, is an effective way to support resident wellness. In addition to bringing the outdoors in through green walls, interior gardens, and extensive plantings, designers can focus on forming visual and physical connections to the outdoors from interior work areas. Combined with plant life and advanced HVAC systems, this kind of indoor/outdoor environment can bring significant air-quality benefits. Outdoor zones, such as terraces, patios and roof decks, also can be activated as workspaces.

As an example, The Architectural Team's (TAT's) recent transformation of the 1.1 million-square-foot Sibley Building in Rochester, N.Y., now known as Sibley Square—created a vibrant, mixed-use urban center, including multifamily, commercial and retail space. The design team specified a range of seating types for the common roof deck, enabling the residents of the 104 units at Spectra at Sibley Square to utilize this desirable amenity space for leisure activities and socializing, as well as for work.

In a related approach, access to light and air is one of today's primary interior design considerations—and it's possible to introduce these benefits into workspace areas even if they're located far from exterior windows and toward a building's core. In TAT's recent residential conversion of The Central Building, a former commercial property in Worcester, Mass., the design team created work pods in an interior hallway located beneath a large, restored skylight. Combining this approach with the specification of folding storefront glass doors on each work pod resulted in significant daylight penetration. The doors' insulated glass also offers acoustical benefits and noise reduction. By folding them

In the recent conversion of **THE CENTRAL BUILDING**, a former commercial property, the design team created work pods in an interior hallway located beneath a large, restored skylight. Combining this approach with the specification of folding storefront glass doors on each work pod resulted in significant daylight penetration.

Folding doors: Milette; hardware: Hafele; locks/cylinders: Adams Rite and Falcon; door pulls: ASSA ABLOY/Rockwood



entirely open, the work pod opens to the hallway outside, offering residents a highly flexible and adaptable space that can be used in a number of ways.

This emphasis on flexibility and adaptability is especially important. As work and home lives evolve and sometimes merge, multifamily properties have to meet new kinds of functional requirements—such as expanded work-from-home offerings—while contributing to the sense of community and belonging that is more important than ever before. Finding ways to balance areas for focus work and collaboration—and providing opportunities for quick work breaks—is crucial.

TAT's designers have taken inspiration from the work at Sibley Square, where the combination of apartments, workspaces, retail, and a central food court provides residents with built-in opportunities for socialization and community. Although most multifamily projects don't operate with the scale and diversity of offerings of this city-within-a-city, the lessons still translate. Effective work-from-home environments should allow residents to choose different levels of engagement with their surroundings and their neighbors and should offer services that can make residents' lives as easy as possible while they work; a great example of this is the growing interest in grab-and-go kiosks that can be located in an apartment building's lobby or common areas and that serve a desire for around-the-clock food and drink options.

## WELLNESS GETS ACTIVE AND CREATIVE: MOVING AND MAKING

Downtime and recreation are also a crucial component of wellbeing. Designing to promote comfort and wellness requires attention to emotional and physical engagement. Over the past several years, fitness centers have evolved to become wellness centers with space for traditional workouts alongside yoga, meditation and more contemplative forms of activity. The design of "traditional" exercise facilities has evolved, too, and it's important to provide dedicated areas for increasingly popular activities, such as barre, reformer Pilates and TRX suspension training classes. Designers and clients alike also realize that fitness and recreation extend into the outdoors. Including walking



PHOTOS: ED WONSEK

The primary club room amenity space in **COURTHOUSE LOFTS** features an array of inviting sofas and armchairs in deep red, brown and gray tones, which harmonize closely with the dark wood historic millwork finishes of the club room, located in a monumental domed former courtroom.

Sofa: Lazar, Arabella; swivel armchair: Lazar, Zagat Swivel; and armchair: Aceray, DUNA-W

paths in the landscape program is a great way to support residents' active lifestyles.

Any retrofit project today should also incorporate bike storage and repair facilities with, where possible, direct exterior access. This is especially crucial as residents in urban and suburban settings turn to alternative modes of transportation; in fact, a growing number of municipalities are mandating this type of onsite cycling infrastructure as they move to reduce parking requirements.

Besides exercise, residents also want

venues in which they can actively explore creative pursuits. Makerspaces are a popular example of this trend and are an increasingly valued amenity in multifamily projects. TAT has incorporated these creative areas into several recent retrofit projects, including the landmarked Wells School Apartments property in Southbridge, Mass., and Courthouse Lofts, the adaptive reuse of a former Worcester, Mass., courthouse into 118 mixed-income apartments. At Courthouse Lofts, the large makerspace offers opportunities for painting, ceramics, calligraphy, DIY



PHOTOS: ED WONSEK

**COURTHOUSE LOFTS** features a game room and large makerspace (right) that offers opportunities for painting, ceramics, calligraphy, DIY projects and more.



projects and more. It has been billed as one of the property's premier amenities. Designers should approach these kinds of spaces as they might an industrial workshop with sturdy, reinforced and impact-resistant flooring, easy-to-clean work surfaces and highly tunable LED lighting.

## SETTING THE MOOD WITH COLOR, TEXTURE, LIGHT AND ART

Studies show the positive emotional health benefits of calming colors and natural materials. Through the use of cohesive and deliberate color palettes, strategic lighting and thoughtful specification, designers can create truly nourishing interior environments.

The Courthouse Lofts project offers a useful case study of how these principles can be incorporated into a historic retrofit project. For example, in individual units, a neutral palette of medium wood tones and timeless white cabinetry and backsplashes creates a serene and relaxing mood—and complements the restored original finishes within the 118 apartments.

Common spaces within the Courthouse Lofts complex reveal a similar approach. The large game room utilizes rich jewel-toned blue-gray paints on wall surfaces with strategic clusters of pendant lighting that provide more intensive moments of illumination to active areas. In contrast, recessed LEDs generate a calmer mood around couches and areas intended for relaxation and conversation.

The furniture specification in this

space also reflects an emerging shift toward bigger, more enveloping shapes for chairs and sofas, which supports wellness through a comforting feeling of embrace and warmth. The primary club room amenity space, for instance, features an array of inviting sofas and armchairs in deep red, brown and gray tones, which harmonize closely with the dark wood historic mill-work finishes of the club room, located in a monumental domed former courtroom. A thoughtful choice of furniture also helps to delineate discrete zones within this large space, where landmark status limited the design team's ability to make structural interventions.

TAT utilized this strategy throughout Courthouse Lofts, adding warmth and breaking down the scale of grand historic halls and rotundas with small gathering areas composed of enveloping lounge chairs and mid-century-inspired custom light fixtures.

A multifamily building's art program has a related effect, benefiting wellness by creating visual focal points, stimulating intellectual engagement and helping residents feel a sense of emotional connection to the place where they live. At Courthouse Lofts, the 1950s-era annex features an art program that emphasizes mid-century pop art-inspired pieces, drawing clear parallels to the building's heritage that can engender curiosity and a sense of pride. At Sterling Lofts in Attleboro, Mass., a sprawling 4-story jewelry factory artfully converted into 91 mixed income units, the art

program features images of machinery and other artifacts once used in the mill, which was built in 1891 by Watson, Newell & Co.

Designers also can boost wellness by incorporating meaningful nods to local culture that address a growing desire for a sense of rootedness and history. In a new adaptive reuse project in Brockton, Mass., TAT incorporated wall tiles that reference cross-stitching on a boxing glove and lighting fixtures that resemble a punching bag in homage to local legend and boxer Marvelous Marvin Hagler. At Courthouse Lofts, the project team went even further, including a public museum dedicated to Marshall "Major" Taylor, a famous Worcester resident and pioneering Black cyclist.

## TRUE ATTENTION TO THE RESIDENT EXPERIENCE

Ultimately, designing for wellbeing in the multifamily context requires creativity and an honest understanding of how residents' lifestyles and needs are evolving. This can mean thinking about small details—the shape of a chair that helps someone decompress or the sound-attenuating properties of a work pod door that can help increase focus. It can also mean thinking about larger design decisions, such as an overall amenities program, like creating makerspaces that allow residents to express creativity in a therapeutic way. With these and other thoughtful strategies, design teams can create powerful interior environments that truly improve residents' lives and their experience of home. 