

How Experts Are Inspired



By Barbara Ballinger | March 24, 2025

Inspiration comes from demographics of an area, what's important historically about the neighborhood, if there are views, nature and a host of other factors that can set each property apart from others.

Where do developers, property managers, architects and design professionals get their inspiration for their multifamily and student housing communities? Is it from the architecture around them, travel destinations, new technology, materials or even competitors' projects? There's no one answer as conversations with seven professionals revealed when asked: Where does your inspiration stem from? Understanding what's behind the choice of brick, wood or concrete for an exterior, a stairway rather than an elevator, big store-front windows, two-toned kitchen cabinetry and much more makes results more interesting to see, live in and learn from. Here are experts' thoughts in condensed edited profiles.

Carmi Bee, FAIA, Partner and Design Principal, RKTB Architects. New York

Because of living, going to college and working primarily in the New York metropolitan area and Princeton, N.J., Carmi Bee's inspiration for the multifamily housing buildings he designs comes primarily from his belief that housing should be supportive of its community and residents. Since he began practicing in 1967, he has worked on his own and with firms that emphasize affordable housing and reflect a partnership with a community's leaders and other advocates. As part of a

wave of adaptive reuse from the 1960s and '70s as industrial and commercial buildings were converted to lofts for living and working, Bee was inspired to avoid transforming the wide-open floor plates into traditional cookie-cutter-style units. Instead, he started to create ones that varied, offered innovative apartment design and flexibility, for example, through movable walls or closets on wheels. According to Bee, RKTB helped pioneer this type of adaptive reuse when the firm designed Turtle Bay Towers utilizing a Midtown light-industrial high-rise, solving the problem of daylight by cutting away demolished shafts to create a courtyard along one wall, and introducing greenhouse window elements on the exterior of upper floors. Another inspiration was the writing of urbanist Jane Jacobs, author of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," who advocated to protect neighborhoods and city streetscapes. Some of Bee's designs now take advantage of infill sites in medium-density urban neighborhoods, often challenging for developers. This inspired him to develop RKTB's Affordable Infill Prototype, a sustainable low-rise design adaptable to almost any lot size and architectural context. In Brooklyn, application of the prototype has resulted in affordable units connected by street-facing, glass-enclosed stairways that put "eyes on the street" by visually connecting residents and passersby, making the neighborhood safer. These stairways also provide good exercise and eliminate the cost of installing elevators, important in affordable designs. Community leaders and neighborhood groups have also been major influencers since they play an active role in decision making, with some of their prime concerns related to safety, proximity of good public transportation, affordability and access.

Ron Cooper, AIA, NCARB, CSI, Senior Project Manager, Associate Principal Svigals + Partners, an FCA Company. New Haven, Conn.

Most of Svigals + Partners' mixed-use, multifamily housing projects represent a collaboration with developers, who come to the firm with a site in mind, unit mix/count and a hope that they will, in addition to desired amenities, fit the development properly on the property. The architects work their magic through a series of exploratory conceptual stages inspired by the project's location, size and shape of the property and what's in the neighborhood, including what competitors have done, if water and views are available, what activities take place and the amount of pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Svigals + Partners also considers the anticipated demographic and what residents in the neighborhood might expect and need. Many factors go into the process to determine the correct design, which is typically now done in wood construction. For The Beam, a five-story building with 204 units in downtown New London, Conn., near the waterfront developed by RJ Development, the demographic was mostly young professionals who work for the local General Dynamics Electric Boat company. To meet the budget, units were designed using an efficient 64-foot-wide module and the design team limited the exterior materials to thin brick and fiber cement in a minimalist exterior design meant to reflect the sleekness of nautical engineering. In plan, each of the three modules align with a nearby boulevard; amenities were located on the ground floor of one leg. The firm's design for BL Development's College & Crown luxury apartment building in downtown New Haven utilized thin brick and granite for a more traditional exterior along with integrated artwork to give it a modern, aspirational edge and link it to its site and the history of a city where three rivers converge and flow into the harbor. Svigals + Partners' overall philosophy is to

improve lives through architecture and art and thus strive to elevate designs with integrated artwork whenever possible. In this case, sculptural panels at the strategic corners mimic elm leaves and the three rivers that were important in the city's development. Parking is planned for within the building, and amenities are located on the ground floor, second floor and rear elevated exterior terraces. A third building, Cadence on Canal, also developed by RJ Development, was designed by Svigals + Partners as an elevated four-story wood-framed mono-block with screened parking underneath. The project is sited along the Farmington Canal Trail that connects with Massachusetts. Randomly placed windows reflect the kinetic nature of the trail used by cyclists and runners. Glass storefronts help the building come alive and tell a story of who lives there.

Chris Fletcher, Executive Vice President, Development, Cortland. Atlanta

With the firm's focus on the "smile" markets, high-growth areas that benefit from good weather, a high quality of life and low cost of living, Cortland's prime inspiration is to cater to its residents in each market because of the company's philosophy that it's in the service industry. It determines choices in developing, building and operating properties by conducting focus groups and surveys, paying attention to reviews and following up on information provided in exit interviews. Feedback is incorporated into decisions for future projects. Because of this emphasis on service, it learns and borrows from the hotel industry but may not take as much risk in choices since residents lease for a year rather than for days as hotel guests do. Yet, even within an area, units reflect choices since not everyone has the same taste. Both warm and cool palettes may be offered for units and free and customized classes may be provided in workout facilities. Certain features reflect a single best choice based on prior knowledge. In Florida, a pool is important while in Denver it's less of a priority—more storage for sports equipment is key because of the area's outdoor-oriented culture. Change is critical when it comes to unit layouts to reflect evolving needs. Post-COVID, the firm introduced dens and Zoom rooms of about 50 square feet or so with a glass door so they could work as an office or place to set up exercise equipment. The change also permitted some residents the peace of mind of not having to upsize their homes, e.g., moving from a studio to a one-bedroom. The exterior of its buildings are usually inspired by its location. The ChampionsGate in Orlando was influenced by the vintage Spanish Colonial Revival architecture of architect Addison Mizner, a leading Florida architect in the 1920s, or in Colorado Springs, Colo., at its Cortland Peterson building, inspired by area ski lodges that look toward mountains and are constructed from natural wood and stone. To bring residents together, the firm spends generously on amenity spaces. After it found many residents weren't using some because they were located too close to a leasing office, it separated the functions for residents' privacy. When a location isn't within walking distance of a town or village, Cortland has incorporated amenities such as a bar, often in partnership with a local purveyor.

KrisAnn Baker Kizer, Vice President of Leasing and Marketing, Pierce Education Properties. San Diego

The inspiration behind Pierce Education Properties' purpose-built student housing (PBSH) design is multifaceted, drawing from several key sources. First, the site's location and climate play a

significant role. In regions with warmer weather, they have incorporated expansive outdoor common areas and shaded courtyards that encourage community and student interaction while providing comfort in hotter months. When a property is an infill, the company works to develop a design that complements the local community or area, ensuring it blends seamlessly into the neighborhood. The focus is on creating a timeless design rather than something too trendy. Pierce Education Properties also adds pops of color and art that reflect the local community, whether through wall graphics, murals or framed artwork. Furthermore, the company prioritizes green spaces, as students often prefer spending time outside their units. Well-designed outdoor spaces are frequently used more than interior amenities. Additionally, the company creates flexible indoor-outdoor spaces, providing students with versatile areas that seamlessly shift between indoor comfort and outdoor enjoyment, further enhancing their experience and connection to the environment.

Jeff Klotz, Owner, The Klotz Group of Companies. Jacksonville Beach, Fla.

The company, which constructs 75% to 80% of its properties in suburban areas, is inspired to focus on its potential residents, which has spurred it to conduct frequent focus groups with a variety of potential residents to hear what they want in a building, from location to exterior finishes, colors, ceiling heights and amenities to what type of smart technology to use, the dimensions of windows and even music played in corridors and elevators. Other inspiration comes from competitors, and often features that didn't work, so The Klotz Group can avoid such choices. In one case, it learned not to make the technology too complicated. Management also takes cues from resorts by traveling to interesting locations abroad and domestically and talking with employees to learn what makes guests happy. Among those lessons have been bigger pools with separate ones for kids, butler service for food and drinks served poolside and entertainment. From the multifamily housing industry, particularly in Europe, it's inspired to make properties more self-sustaining by having more services on site such as a drycleaner, grocery store, food purveyors, all of which can help increase a developer's bottom line. Regarding design, it uses social media posts to follow many influencers and learn about the latest trends for all demographics, including Baby Boomers who may be downsizing from large homes but don't want small apartments and ones without ample storage. It also follows what's happening in the world at large, including curveballs encountered such as an economic downturn. Because of greater interest in nature and water, it knows it's able to charge more for better views from each unit and orients and constructs buildings accordingly to feature more outdoor trails and pet parks. The Harbour, a 456-unit building in Jacksonville, Fla., sets a new standard for its market, inspired by higher-end hospitality properties, service and quality of life. The company prides itself on using all its influences to make each property different, based on the site and regional location.

Toh Tsun Lim, AIA, Partner, PEI Architects. New York

One inspiration has been to design buildings that fit the cultural and historic context of a location through the choice of materials and architectural forms. In Toronto, where many residential and office towers have gone up in recent years due to the city's strong economy and real estate market,

most have been glass and steel to reflect a modern aesthetic that provides light, views and clean lines. Yet, they've also been strikingly similar, which wasn't what one developer client of the firm wanted for a new 46-story, multifamily building it planned. Though a condominium, the choice of the design and its materials used offer lessons in apartment design as well. Because of the developer's long history in Toronto real estate and PEI Architect's history of working there, the project team was inspired to make use of reinforced concrete, a modern material popular in the 1960s and '70s. Prized for its ability to be sculpted and given different textures, reinforced concrete quickly replaced the use of the period's popular brick and mortar. The introduction again of concrete by PEI Architects for its 2221 Yonge Street project didn't look out of place since many of the city's older concrete structures still stand such as the CN Tower—formerly the world's tallest structure—a 1,815-foot-high communications and observation building completed in 1976, and the City Hall by Viljo Revell in 1965. Because the firm's roots have strong links both to the East and West, it tries to reflect those influences, along with a site or area's history, in each project through appropriate visual connectors. For example, a new luxury mixed-use property in Queens, N.Y., the Flushing Creek, celebrates its location by creating a new plaza integrating the multifamily building's activities into the neighborhood's pedestrian life. The New York City Centurion incorporates a courtyard and water feature to provide a peaceful retreat amid urban hustle and bustle living.

Meghann Van Dorn, Director of Interior Design, The Architectural Team (TAT). Boston

Who will live in a building is a major influence on all projects TAT designs, from the exterior to units and amenities. All projects begin with a concept presentation that reflects the demographic of the residents. Sometimes the developer researches through focus groups and sometimes the firm does. Another influence is the location. The Cove, a site in Worcester, Mass., was once a nightclub where the Rolling Stones performed in the 1980s, and is near the Polar Park baseball stadium, home of the Worcester Red Sox. TAT staff used those two narratives to influence its choice of design elements such as the paint palette and materials to appeal to the anticipated 20- and 30-something residents, who might find the building and city as a more affordable alternative to living in nearby Boston. A neutral palette allows residents to decorate as they want and higher-end choices such as solid-surface countertops, cabinetry that goes to the ceiling and luxury vinyl plank tiled floors with a European oak aesthetic offer the feeling of getting more bang for their buck. Because of Polar Park, the firm designed the building with large windows and balconies and oriented it to provide good views of the stadium. Amenities were carefully located to bring residents together during the day or in the evening. In another TAT project in Everett, Mass., Anthem Everett, a much larger building reflects a burgeoning art community in the area. For kitchens, dual-tone Italian cabinetry with a palette of wood and creamy white and built-in lighting resembles cabinetry that would go into a for-sale home. The building's 450 units and the design include an exterior courtyard and double-sided fireplace with a horseshoe bar for work by day and drinks and conversation by night, providing seating options and a lobby similar to coffee shops popular with the work-from-home group. Makerspace was included to allow people to explore their creativity, considering the building's anticipated demographic of artists, and outside the confines of their individual units. In a third TAT project in Swampscott, Mass., The Westcott reflects a New England vernacular style,

inspired by the area's shingled and lapboard façades. The firm has also been inspired by favorite resort destinations in New England, where guests have a choice of niches to be alone or gather in spaces for congregating. In many senior and other living communities, TAT makes nature a priority with atriums, easy access between indoors and outdoors, big windows for light, moss walls, wood flooring and a palette reminiscent of the natural world. In buildings designed for a younger cohort, low carbon footprint choices become a priority with carpet from recycled products, LED lighting and electrical choices that curtail waste. The majority of buildings are pet friendly, which dictates a need for durable materials.

Barbara Ballinger is a contributor to units and is the co-author of 20 books; her latest is Kitchen Conversation: Sharing Secrets to Kitchen Design Success (Images Publishing with Margaret Crane).