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Multifamily housing in a post-COVID world - by Thomas House

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There is some discussion as to whether multifamily design is being changed by the coronavirus pandemic, or if changes underway are merely being accelerated.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say, 'Yes.'

With a caveat: One of the immutable laws of the universe is regression to the mean. So there will be some push and pull, but changes will become a new normal—and from the perspective of buyers and tenants, desirable.

Given the new normal, first and foremost, people want their homes to be safe. And these people are our customers.

The AIA has published a document identifying six areas for design consideration:

1. Entry
2. Lobby
3. Circulation
4. Residential Unit
5. Services
6. Amenities

Our focus here will be on the areas that impact the residents, and as we're not ordered-sequential here, let's start with number 4.

Residential Unit Design

The mudroom is a transitional area that provides an 'airlock' that can keep the outside world out before residents (or guests) fully enter. Shoes, coats, bikes (and whatever they've been exposed to) can stay outside. The addition of a bathroom and a laundry closet multiplies the effect. Surfaces should be smooth and washable—tile, concrete, and laminates for example.

Even after the pandemic has subsided, there will continue to be flare-ups of COVID, something still unidentified, or a new regime we will all follow in flu season. And for that, nothing has suddenly become more important than a home office. In a multifamily residential unit, this will likely be a flexible nook or perhaps a built-in console unit—and it might need to be capable of accommodating a toddler or a schoolchild. (Is there a teenager? Probably slumped on the couch with a laptop propped up in an impossible location.) Offices, of course, require storage and some power utilities, so millwork will be part of the solution.

Accommodation needs to include some form of privacy space where a spouse, guest, or child can go for separation—especially from the office or learning center. Kitchens are sometimes that space, but in many units a niche and movable panels may suffice to ensconce a comfortable chair or a stationary bike (because the exercise room is closed).

Though we're not huge on internet-of-things devices for privacy reasons, voice or app-controlled controls such as thermostats, switches, and lighting fixtures further reduce the opportunity for accidental transmission. If you're as paranoid as we are about privacy, look for bluetooth or local WiFi options that don't phone home every time you change the thermostat.

Ventilation is no longer a back-burner priority when we've discovered what aerial transmission means for reducing contagion. Separate clean air supply for air conditioning and hot-air systems is now a critical component of your thermal exchange strategy.

And finally, the balcony either be closed, or have the flexibility to be either open or closed. A balcony that can be closed can be used as a privacy space, so consideration should be given to a movable or fixed privacy partition.

Services and Amenities

Services we used to consider the important touchpoints of multifamily residences. Today, those need to become touch-free touch points. The transition to contact-free controls has been under way for a while. Now it is essential.

Besides the outer entrances and motion-activated lighting, the 'coin laundry' needs to acquire app-based control, trash and recycling receptacles need drop-through openings, and you've already got hand sanitizers, right?

Some shared areas should have access controls that can limit the number of users to be present at any given time. In addition to the laundry room, recreation rooms, party rooms, and common storage areas should be operated by a digital reservation system. This can be managed either by an operator at the amenity desk, or via the cloud-based reservation apps with integrated locks.

Circulation

Does any place in the building suddenly look more dangerous than a double-loaded corridor?

Some of our recent work already includes direct access at the ground floor, and single loaded corridors above (see our ad on this page for a project with a single-loaded corridor). This is currently the safest option available.

In the case of double-loaded corridors, default exchange with outside air should be used. For existing structures, cost-saving energy reductions should be terminated and the air flow dialed up to 11. Filters should be clean to ensure that air flow is at maximum efficiency.

In many cases, hospital-type pressurization can be employed to make sure any air from a unit with an infected resident can flow into a shared corridor.

Multiple points of access—not just emergency exits (alarm will sound) - will reduce the number of

individuals who will encounter each other in a corridor.

Though some of these changes are a process of evolution already begun, the coronavirus pandemic indicates a tectonic shift we thought to be a little further out—climate change—has already occurred.

Unseen airborne danger is now an immediate concern, and we note this mindful of the air quality in places currently consumed by forest fires.

As designers and developers, we are not just thinking ahead—we are working ahead to meet these challenges. Now it's time to pick up the pace.

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