

The Architect's Newspaper

Amenitize This

The drive for postpandemic perks to attract buyers and renters challenges architects to create buzzy shared spaces. How's it going?



JG Neukomm Architecture designed The Suffolk's resident lounge for active day and night use. It has a loungy side, pictured above, and a more upright side with two library tables. (William Laird)

Late last year, I toured Bergen, a 105-unit condominium building in Brooklyn's Boerum Hill neighborhood. The project, developed by Avdoo & Partners, includes architecture by Taller Frida Escobedo, master planning and landscape by DXA Studio and Patrick Cullina, and interior design by Workstead. The units, set behind brick screens on the sawtooth street frontage, will be luxurious. They're also pricey: As of this writing, the cheapest unit is a 472-square-foot studio listed for \$750,000.

Still, ownership comes with benefits. After my tour, I kept thinking about the long list of spaces that will be available across the complex, from a lower-level suite to a central, glassy great room to the rooftop terraces. Residents will have access to a lounge, spa, fitness and yoga studios, a screening room, podcast and video conference spaces, a chef's kitchen, and more, reflecting a desire for developers to attract buyers or renters with every sort of amenity imaginable, checking boxes such as wellness, creative, fitness, and entertainment needs—all trendy aspects for real estate marketing in the postpandemic era.



As part of its wellness suite, Bergen's tea room will be operated by Kettl, a Japan- and Brooklyn-based company serving the finest Japanese teas. (DARCSTUDIO/Courtesy Bergen)

It would be too easy to parody this level of service for soon-to-be-pampered Brooklynites. Instead, Bergen's offerings demonstrate the importance of these extended sets of activities beyond the footprint of one's own unit for contemporary buyers. Amenities are increasingly how developments attract interest, especially in New York, where living quarters are small and market pressures control the size of new units. These spaces—and their potential to become something like the highly sought-after third spaces—support activities that were once distributed across the neighborhood. Rather than venturing too far from home, we can log in from a coworking lounge, exercise in the gym, swim in the pool, socialize, and drop off the kids for child care without leaving the premises.

Americans feel lonelier than ever, so these gathering spaces have a purpose: Shared rooms can be beneficial for young people who just moved to a new city or families with children or older folks looking to stay social. The pandemic accelerated the desire for these options, as the strictures of office life were relaxed for many professionals and demand for hospitality offerings surged across many project sectors. In response, a certain profile of adept architects has emerged with the expertise to work across the domains of architecture, interior architecture, interior design, furniture design, wayfinding, graphic design, and event programming to design these spaces.

AN spoke with architects who design these spaces and developers who fund them to understand how and why these spaces are changing—and what those changes mean for architects who deliver new multifamily residential projects.



A library in Bergen makes for a social space that can also be used by tenants for coworking in a world that has embraced hybrid working. (DARCSTUDIO/Courtesy Bergen)

The Developer's Perspective

Though amenity offerings vary, “two trends are universal,” Frank Frallicciardi, senior vice president at Brookfield, told AN. “First, tenants expect more and better amenities, and they play an outsized role in attracting prospective residents. Second, the amenity spaces, be it high-end gyms, pools, or just beautiful sitting rooms, are used far more by residents than they used to be.”

The attraction of amenities existed before the pandemic, but the crisis amplified “the demand for those spaces, making them more essential than ever,” Simeon E. Maleh, executive vice president of development, at Gotham, said. Gotham develops, owns, and operates a portfolio of residential buildings. Beyond physical spaces, Gotham also offers off-property programming, like “wine tastings, apple picking, and sailing trips.”

Wellness and fitness suites are must-have checklist items, but so are “multifunctional spaces that accommodate diverse needs—spaces that seamlessly blend work, leisure, and community,” Maleh said. This is important for socialization, especially for younger residents. Good communal space “might be as simple as a welcoming and well-designed game room to host friends or even just to read a book or write emails but within a shared space and in the presence of others,” Frallicciardi offered.

A common refrain is that residents increasingly rely on these spaces for both everyday activities and special events. With for-purchase units, “people are making a substantial investment of money, and because of that, we’re very aware that their home is like their sanctuary,” Brad Stein, president of Intracorp Texas, told me. His company develops housing in Austin and across California, Washington, and Canada. The design of the home is important, but so too is the design of the common spaces: “Those spaces need to interact with each other; [residents shouldn’t] feel like two separate people designed them or that they’re not consistent with each other.”

Third-Space Specialists

One difference in approach is in the mission of a developer who aims to sell the building upon completion of its sales or leasing campaign versus an owner who will hold on to it long term, Adam Rolston, senior founding partner of INC Architecture & Design, observed. At their worst, amenities become thirst-trap clickbait for buyers who are lured in by the lifestyle fantasy. “There has been an emphasis in the condo world for beautifully designed spaces, without thinking about the stuff that doesn’t have anything to do with [architects], which is the programming and the creation of a life there,” Rolston said.



A resident's lounge space at the Anagram, designed by INC. (Brooke Holm)

INC has designed both high-end condos for purchase and apartments for rent in New York. “What’s missing in the context of the condo is that there is no lively, transient, evolving population” like in a hotel, Rolston said. The Anagram, a rental building (123 units), was more successful because it has built-in turnover and its resident spaces are overseen by a general manager of sorts. (When the property was written up in *The New York Times* in 2023, Kevin Torres, its lifestyle manager, was featured.)



The Anagram also features a penthouse lounge and terrace on the 27th floor with views along Central Park South. (Brooke Holm)

INC often begins with a list of desired uses from an advisory company and a gut check about how much square footage a developer is willing to dedicate to amenities, which is often space on lower levels, on ground floors, and in basements that can't be used for units. “Then it’s about us trying to figure out what the right adjacencies are to create activity and good experiences in those spaces,” Rolston shared. Sometimes gyms and community rooms get pushed around the project until the right placement locks in. This search benefits from INC being both the architect and the interior architect, as its designers are “a bit hobbled” when handed a plan, told a program, and asked to “just dress it.” It’s always better to start discussions about amenity design early on, as it gets harder to make changes once walls and columns are locked in place.

For decades, hospitality brands have experimented to determine what sort of aspirational environment works for their desired clientele, and this mindset is now seeping into office and multifamily design, which has formed a Bermuda Triangle of cozy spaces between what were once distinct typologies. But the goal is to create a choose-your-own-adventure playing field, where different activities can be handled across a *lobbylandschaft* of possibility.

“In my more elevated moments, I like to think of INC as focusing on the third place as designers,” Rolston reflected. “That really excites me.” When he entered architecture school and was asked “Why are you here?” he replied, “‘Because I want to make beautiful things for lots of people.’ So this idea of the third place, where people can come together and enjoy a space—and enjoy each other in that space—is what gets me going.”

A New Approach Inside and Out

At Eagle + West in Greenpoint (745 units), Marmol Radziner contributed amenity interiors and landscape architecture within an overall architecture designed by OMA New York. Delivering “wonderful outdoor areas that could be used at least six months out of the year was a big driver,” Matt Jackson, principal and studio director of the firm’s New York office, said. Designers, working pre-COVID, already started with the assumption that residents would work everywhere, Ashley Nath, associate and studio director of interiors, recalled. Power was amply supplied with the idea that room usage would change over time, so flexibility is key.



Eagle + West’s interior spaces were designed by Marmol Radziner. Beyond shared lounges, amenities include a “crash pad” for celebrations, children’s room, and workshop. (Scott Frances)

Jackson recalled visiting Eagle + West when its lofty, reservable “test kitchen” was in use for a dinner party. What’s the cultural distinction between having to have everything all in your own 10,000-square-foot home versus having access to a space like that? Choosing the latter is “attractive to a lot of people,” he wagered. Of course, there are big differences like subcontractors and budget: It’s hard to achieve a highly coordinated level of finish on a multifamily project with limited dollars.

Market demands change quickly. Jackson said the firm is now repositioning a building lobby in Williamsburg from 2015 to make it more WFH-friendly by creating smaller seating groups and getting rid of the massive, showy sofa. “I think that a lot of what we’re seeing now is a reflection of listening to the rental community and seeing how they want to live,” Jackson said. While some of the hype is developers oneupping each other, “in a bigger-picture way this is more about a change in lifestyle.”

Southwestern Living

For Michael Hsu Office of Architecture (MHOA), amenities consist not only of “the interior spaces that are controlled by the residents but also the public realm and the extension of building to the city,” Maija Kreishman, a principal of the practice, said. From its offices in Austin and Houston, the studio brings its experience in custom residential and hospitality projects to these commissions. Layering and art are important, and the office regularly handles custom fixtures or art services.

Because these are not private homes subject to a single client’s taste, the design can be more intense with color and furniture to give the spaces a memorable identity. There may be over a dozen “zones” across the project, so the goal is establishing cohesion while having “something that everyone can go to at multiple times in their week and get a different experience.”



In Phoenix, Moontower was designed to appeal to a younger crowd, so it has a clubbier feel. (Chase Daniel)

Market demographics vary. In Austin, unit sizes are generally larger, and residents are interested in being active outdoors and socializing. Having a lobby coffee spot or an enticing pool area is useful, in addition to a calendar of activities. In Phoenix, within a building designed by Shepley Bulfinch, MHOA also recently completed an amenities project for Moontower (326 units) for a younger crowd, so the feel is clubbier; the pool is more central and easily accessible through large operable windows. And, as in every project, doggos get pampered: There is a pet spa for pup washing, a dog run, and even an indoor space where people can watch their pooches romp.

Flexible, multifunctional rooms are the core of durable amenity suites. At Intracorp's 44 East in Austin (322 units), a building designed by Page on Rainey Street downtown, MHOA designed a room for kids, with the anticipation of families moving in or empty nesters purchasing units and hosting grandchildren in the building. This didn't happen, so residents found other uses for it—like a make-out spot, Stein recalled. The lesson? Don't be so specific.



At 44 East in Austin, Michael Hsu Office of Architecture brings its experience in hospitality to bear in a residential project. Here a circular, textured wall complements a custom wood island. (Chase Daniel)

Intracorp also brings in HOA management companies early to get feedback about amenity usage and programming. Leland, an Intracorp condo development on a parcel along South Congress (265 units), was designed by MHOA postpandemic and is anticipated to open in 2027 with a host of wellness and gathering spaces. Instead of having one person camp out in a big conference room all day, which is inefficient, Leland will include many small private areas for remote work. Then larger spaces can be reconfigurable for that spectrum of activity between work and play: A library can be hot-desked by day and host a chef-prepared private dinner by night.

Kreishman thinks these lessons aren't exclusive to luxury developments. MHOA recently completed an affordable housing complex in Austin for Project Transitions (61 units), which provides support for people living with HIV and AIDS. The shared spaces, including a porch and community garden, attempt to provide comfort and support without forcing interaction.

Architectural Imperatives

"I'm very interested in this idea of what an interior architect does versus what an architect does," Jean-Gabriel Neukomm, founding principal of JG Neukomm Architecture, told me. His practice has completed three residential projects for Gotham: The latest, The Suffolk on the Lower East Side (378 units), opened in 2023. Neukomm, when first meeting Gotham CEO David Pickett some 15 years ago, was impressed with his attitude: New York is lonely for newcomers, people work crazy hours, and the rents are what they are, but "a lot of young people live in these buildings, and it's brutal for them to meet people," Neukomm recalled Pickett saying. The goal was to create a space where they can hang out, meet, talk, make friends, and collaborate.

Whereas previously the activity was mostly nocturnal, Neukomm said postpandemic amenity use is now an all-day affair. At The Suffolk, the shared floor is split into lower, loungy stagings on the south side and two long library tables with more upright seating on the north. You can use a laptop in both zones, but the difference is your posture. There are several small rooms for private meetings or calls. In the middle an open stair, with stone-clad risers, leads to an outdoor area, and an open kitchen is a good spot for a midday snack or an EOD happy hour.



Neukomm also designed the lobby at The Suffolk, an elegant space with terrazzo floors, and custom furniture designed by the firm. (William Laird)

Neukomm's scope also included the lobby, an elegant space with terrazzo floors, custom furniture designed by his office, a wainscot of light stone, and a vaulted plaster ceiling. The Suffolk, in his view, uses the complexity of the city—its nuance, color, and texture—as a springboard for a design that builds a bridge to the neighborhood: It's an interesting place for a resident, so "we want to bring some of that in and encourage you to go outside."

The feeling one has upon entering the front door is "probably the most important thing we design," Neukomm said. "It's a little bit like dating: You have a pretty good sense within 30 seconds as to how it's going to go. You walk in through the door, and if you don't feel it's right, then it's going to be a tough sell."

Generally, interior architecture can be "fantastically difficult," Neukomm admitted, and the intricacy of dealing with existing structures doesn't get the respect it deserves. Neukomm said, "I'd like for the general industry to get better and for people to create these spaces in a better way. Sometimes the budget isn't there, but even on a budget you can be a little more thoughtful about it." Interior architecture "should be respected more as a thing that creates durable community spaces and social cohesion."

His advice for improvement? "Don't do any weird shit. Just do basic things that are a little bit more universal and do them super well."

In Real Life

Often, architects who are committed to delivering good design face the real-world constraints of budgets and timelines. Last month, my girlfriend and I toured a recently finished building of market-rate apartments in Brooklyn (169 units). It was the first time we had seriously considered living in one of these developments, and while the units had brand-new appliances, in-unit laundry, and nice views, we couldn't shake the awkwardness of the shared spaces. Fake plants drooped over the mailboxes in the lobby, and the Astroturf slid slickly under our feet on the rooftop chill space. Everything was brand-new, but it was hard for us to visualize how our lives would unfold there. Maybe another place would hit the spot.

With the nation facing a combined affordability crisis plus a loneliness epidemic, it feels imperative to prioritize spaces where people can feel comfortable and connect with one another. Amenity areas fall flat when they're ignored as another check box on a pro forma or they reinforce an indulgent lifestyle of on-demand satisfaction. But in the hands of thoughtful designers working with amenable clients, they become bridges—among residents, but also between a building and the city.