



High-density developments in N.J. being redesigned for COVID-conscious lifestyles

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By Steve Strunsky

COVID-19 has changed not only the way we live, but also the spaces we live in.

In addition to shopping and going to school with masks on, maintaining a social distance at the post office, and going out less to eat, a lot of us are working from home. And for many, home has shifted from urban areas to more suburban, rural or shore front locales in pursuit of more room to move and fresh air to breathe.

Now, developers of high-density housing eager to attract renters or buyers, particularly in urban areas, have been incorporating design elements and amenities intended to address COVID concerns by minimizing the chance of transmission of the virus and accommodating telecommuting.

New projects that have come on the market since the pandemic commonly include COVID-conscious features like contactless entryways, additional elevators and ultraviolet ventilation systems, as well as home-office facilities.

“A lot of people tried to be pro-active and made a lot of changes, and our building is a great example of that,” said developer Art Johnson, a principal of Waterfront Management LLC in Jersey City.

Johnson’s building is a sprawling 629-unit rental complex known as 3 Acres on Jersey City’s West Side, an emerging real estate market that has attracted investment following development of the city’s well-known Hudson River waterfront and then its Greenville and Journal Square areas.

Named for the size of the lot occupied by the six-story rectangular complex, 3 Acres was designed by Hoboken architect Dean Marchetto of Marchetto Higgins Stieve before the pandemic’s arrival in March 2020, but design changes were made during construction after social distancing became household words.

For example, the main entrance along Claremont Avenue was originally designed as a set of revolving doors that would have generated repeated hand-contact in the same spot on the doors’ thick glass panels as residents pushed their way in and out during the morning and evening rush hours.

So the revolving doors were replaced by a broad glass foyer equipped with inner and outer sets of automatic sliding doors timed to open, one after the other, to keep warm or cool air in or out, as residents and visitors stroll into the lobby or out onto the sidewalk without touching a thing.

There's a bank of three elevators immediately to the left and two others elsewhere for a total of five lifts in the relatively low-rise building, intended to minimize crowding going up or down. To the left and right, running the full 600-foot, two-block width of the building, is a concourse measuring 18 feet wide and 15 feet high, allowing plenty of space for residents to pass by each other at least six feet apart.

The concourse is punctuated by groups of three or four café tables set against the street-side wall, each one with a semicircular seating nook carved out of the wall, achieving a distinct look, a sense of intimacy, and a physical barrier between the people seated that side of each table.

Several standup placards reading "Masks recommended" dotted the concourse and other common areas of the building. Johnson said plans for thousands of square feet of street-level retail space were scrapped to allow for expanded common areas adjacent to the concourse. They include a 5,000-square-foot lounge with fireplaces, large-screen TVs, ping-pong and pool tables, pinball machines, a two-lane miniature bowling alley and a vintage jukebox, providing diversion for a night-in when an event is cancelled or a crowded bar doesn't feel right.

A fascinating form of on-premises entertainment is 3 Acres' Steinway Spirio digital grand piano, which can play back anything played on it or simultaneously duplicate a live performance by a pianist playing another Steinway Spirio anywhere in the world.

Three interior courtyards with day cabanas, shuffleboard and bocci courts, as well as a near-Olympic size pool and a 4,000-square foot gym, let tenants spread out while they work out.

"We made everything bigger and more spacious so people had enough area to be together but be apart," Johnson said.

There's a washer and drier in every unit, including micro-studios of just 289 square feet, meaning tenants can avoid congregating in a laundry room. Even the micro units promote telecommuting, with custom furnishings including a dining table that doubles as a work station. Rents range from \$1,500 for studios to \$3,500 for an 1,100-square-foot 2-bedroom apartment.

In Middlesex County, at 99 Bridge, a 150-unit rental complex in Old Bridge, a business suite allowing tenants to work remotely was just what new tenants Aqueel and Ritika Ahmed needed after they moved into the building from northern California on Oct. 1.

The couple had kept their financial-tech jobs in the San Francisco Bay Area but relocated to be near family in New Jersey for the birth of their child. The problem was that their home-office furniture and all their other possessions didn't arrive for another six weeks thanks to a moving company mishap.

“They have a co-working lounge, with three offices and a conference room, and for one and a half months I was working out of that office,” Aqueel said of 99 Bridge, which was developed jointly by BNE Real Estate Group, Sterling Properties and LPZ. “This was a very good thing that came in handy because of my furniture not getting there.”

The couple has continued to work for the Bay Area company, and to live in Old Bridge, where their daughter was born.

“She’s a Jersey girl,” her dad confirmed.

Other COVID-minded characteristics of 99 Bridge include an abundance of outdoor space, notably a two-story tenants’ lounge with multiple gathering areas, a swimming pool, barbecue and outdoor dining areas, an outdoor bar with TV screening areas, fire pits and a dog run.

The Atwater in Bogota, is a 3-phase rental complex totaling 539 units that has nearly leased out its two initial stages and is now in construction on the 118 units of its final phase. The project, by PCD Development of New Providence, also includes ample outdoor space, as well as a business center with Steelcase Brody pods.

And the Atwater’s indoor amenities are also equipped with ultra-violet air sanitizers that can kill the virus.

In Union County, Vermella at Garwood Station in Garwood, a 296-unit rental project by Russo Development, retained the digital and in-person concierge service NFC, to give residents a choice “to attend in person or take advantage of virtual events based on their comfort level,” according to a spokesman for the project. Russo also provides Teams/Facetime virtual tours for prospective tenants.

Another Jersey City project, 351 Marin, a 507-unit rental building in the city’s downtown neighborhood, added seating to a 4,500-square-foot plaza to expand its outdoor space during construction after the outbreak. The joint project also features “round-the-clock staff cleaning and disinfecting,” according to the developers, KRE Group and Northwestern Mutual. Three-quarters of the units have been leased since opening in November, according to KRE and Northwestern.

Citizen Linden, a Union County project with 234 rental units and 4,500 square feet of retail space, provides co-working spaces on each floor, with three workstations each, to minimize crowding in any one area. Extra-wide wide hallways and elevator waiting areas were also integrated into the building design.

A pair of courtyards provide outdoor space with seating and barbecuing. “They also include bike storage and a bike share program, as the popularity of bicycling as a hobby skyrocketed during the pandemic,” the developer, Accurate Builders & Developers, accurately noted.

Anti-viral benefits aside, features like spacious common areas and outdoor space would be appealing to any would-be tenants, not just the COVID-conscious crowd. And the buildings are not necessarily marketed as safe havens.

Josie Charles, a 23-year-old pet groomer with a studio at 3 Acres, said she hadn't been aware of the building's anti-viral features since moving in two months ago from Bayonne. And with her business, Unsoiled, reliant entirely on house calls, working from home is not even a consideration for Charles. But she was glad to hear that her new digs might reduce the chance that she and her neighbors will spread the coronavirus, or any other contagion, to one another.

And she does like all the things to do there.

"It's fun," she said.