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Development & Design: Boutique Housing

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For the past century, the fashion industry has been capitalizing on the idea of couture—the designing, making, and selling of high-quality, custom-designed clothing. In the past, only the social elite could afford to buy high-quality custom-designed products. But new technologies, a global economy, and a better-educated consumer base has increased their demand and availability to a larger market. The housing industry is now experimenting with the concept of the couture. From a concept that began in the hospitality industry, the desire for living in high-quality custom environments continues to grow and evolve.

Before You Get Started

The design of public spaces in boutique housing—like boutique hotels—usually has a highly stylized theme or image. [Click here for a case study: Donatelli Development's Kenyon Square TOD project in Washington, D.C. (pictured)]. The difference between boutique housing and boutique hotels is the lifespan of the original built design. The hospitality industry usually has more available funds for maintenance, repairs and redesign. This provides the building the ability to keep up with current trends and change more over time. This may happen as often as every five years.

The housing industry works differently. Change is slower, especially in condominiums where associations govern the properties and owners must pay for the renovations in increased dues. Boutique housing design should be much more thoughtful for this reason. Being contemporary is perfectly acceptable, although the design will need to be done in a way to obtain an element of timelessness. The original built design may remain for the next 15-20 years.

Throughout the design process the designer and developer should repeatedly ask if the design will last this time span. It is best to use easily maintained and durable materials in a way that will hold up to the regular wear and tear a public space endures for a longer period of time. And, of course, a space that is functional for present lifestyles, yet adaptable for future changes, will help minimize the need and cost of future renovations.



Photo courtesy of Chris Spielmann, Spielmann Studio.

Boutique housing is becoming more of the norm in larger cities. Each building is trying to be different from the others, while providing the basic services needed. This allows consumers great opportunities when selecting the building, location, and design that fits their lifestyles. As haute couture push the limits and quality of fashion, architects and developers have the opportunity to provide this for the home environment.

The Birth of Boutique Housing



Photo courtesy of Chris Spielmann, Spielmann Studio.

The first boutique hotels were opened in the early 1980s. These high-end hotels are typically not part of a large chain and are medium to small in size. They are exclusive in their design that tends to be high quality and may revolve around a general theme or concept. Over the years, the popularity of boutique hotels has grown, and they can now be found in any major international.

The trend in the hospitality industry is similar to the trend in the American housing industry, except the trend in the housing industry developed much more slowly. Over the past 10 to 15 years, Americans developed the fascination and urge to renovate their homes. As this trend increased, the large do-it-yourself centers grew, the television programs went from "how to install tile around your tub" to "how to install your own mosaic tile foyer."

Television programs like Moving Up or Dream Home, showing different types of residential design, also became plentiful and

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easily accessible. This allowed the average consumer to view a variety of residential design approaches. Home materials, products, and furnishings manufacturers and retailers "tuned in" to the quality design being sought by the consumer. These companies in turn sponsored the TV programs the consumers were watching. Highly designed products came into the market that fit the pocketbook of the average consumer. Stores like Target and IKEA began to hire well-known designers to create high-quality designed products at affordable prices. As other stores started to compete, the level and quality of design available to the consumer increased dramatically, and so did their education and appreciation.

During the late 1990s, the economy experienced a boom. The technology bubble grew and lifted America out of the dragging recession. This improved the housing market and houses started selling again. It started slow at first, but they were selling. As the tech market bloomed, the housing market increased and people moved back to the cities revitalizing urban areas. There was a growing demand for high-quality, custom-designed housing. Still, there were not many different products out on the market.

Housing developers ventured little from the basic formula generated 20 years earlier. In 2003, interest rates on home loans lowered, the housing market exploded. Developers built new housing all over revitalized urban areas. They began to customize their apartment and condominium buildings to make them stand out from their neighbors. Initially, the solution for this greater competition was more amenities. Community rooms, gyms and tech centers became the normal upgrade. The designs, though, remained modest and humble.

Restaurants, lounges, and boutique retail stores in the same revitalized neighborhoods, on the other hand, pushed the limits of design. Faced with fierce competition, these businesses often provided edgy modern, stark minimalist, or flashy high-tech environments. These businesses consistently battled for customers. The image was just as important as the services they provided. Design-hungry consumers flocked to these well-designed experiences.

Furnishings retailers also flourished in the good economy. Businesses like "Design Within Reach" and "Bo Concepts" introduced new and re-introduced classic modern furnishings. Yet, there was a problem. The average consumer bought modern furniture liking the style and simplistic nature. When they placed the piece in their home it did not work. At the time, most buildings had neo-traditional types of interior design. Crown molding, fake ionic columns, and chair rails did not go with the hip Gen X-er's Eames and Breuer furniture.

Taking note of these growing trends, developers began to create high-end designer apartment or condominium buildings to gain an edge over their competition.

How to Implement Boutique Housing Design

Suddenly design was in vogue and architects seized the opportunity. The key to creating boutique housing design relates directly to an understanding of the target market. Developers usually have a good idea of their target demographics. Boutique housing is highly stylized and individual. The design needs to be well received by the target market but must also be inviting to consumers outside of the target range, as well as to reach a wider base of consumers.

There are a lot of different factors that drive the exterior design of boutique housing. From the exterior, these buildings may appear in many different ways depending on their immediate environment and restrictions within their neighborhoods. With many cities pushing revitalization in run-down or abandoned neighborhoods, some cities have special plans for revitalization that can structure the design or restoration of buildings. Often, there are new development incentives or rebates that make these areas exciting and desirable.

Buildings with no neighborhood design restrictions can be less restricted in their style and design. Regardless of the situation, the underlying concept is to create an attractive exterior design that can draw the initial attention of the average pedestrian. Getting this initial attention invites the pedestrian to take a closer look.

The building designs may be modern or traditional in form on the exterior but the interior design has much more freedom. The amenities remain the same but their placement has been rearranged. In older buildings, exercise rooms and community rooms were placed in the back of house or other infill spaces of the building. Now the amenities are usually grouped together and placed in the front of the buildings similar to a hotel.

These are being treated more as public spaces than shared tenant spaces. The design of the connected spaces should be cohesive and unified. That is not to say that the finishes are all the same—or of the same level—but they do have a relationship to each other. For example, an aerobics room connected off of the main two-story lobby does not require the same finishes as the lobby, but it may have a paint or wall detail that reflects something seen in the lobby.

The spatial connectivity of the shared public spaces also promotes interaction between the tenants much more than in a typical residential condo. Having the public spaces gathered in the front or ground floor also allows pedestrians a view of the lifestyle the building offers. This public interaction can help during initial sales or leasing, and it continues to help through the life of the building. You could say that good design helps sell units.

If the desired residents are to be young urban professionals, large lounges are usually provided to facilitate parties and networking opportunities. This would include large prep kitchens; built-in bars; integrated and sophisticated AV systems such as Wi-Fi or plasma screens; light, movable furniture for easy re-configuration; and larger control of the lighting. These buildings can often have business tech centers, game rooms, and a variety of exercise rooms.

If the building is targeted for empty nesters, the lounge is usually designed less for parties but more for smaller gatherings and every day use—a communal living room. Catering hutches are usually provided rather than built-in bars. These buildings similarly have exercise rooms, but often the size and arrangements may differ. Libraries are often provided for book share programs, common Internet access, and a place for reading groups to meet. The concept for empty nesters is that the public rooms are an extension of the home, while for young urban professionals these are an extension of the city.