

High ceilings, high tone: Multifamily interiors go upscale

BY FRANK JOSSI
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Look inside the Ninth Street Lofts in downtown St. Paul, and you'll get a glimpse of the urban multifamily condominium of the future. Units boast 10-foot ceilings, translucent sliding walls, large windows, open floor plans and a host of furnishings a customer can select to customize their space.

At Marketplace Lofts in Hopkins, the wall between the bedroom and living room slides open and a raised floor at the entrance gives the owner a full view of the living room.

Both projects pre-wire areas within units for computers and other electronics equipment but otherwise leave the space open enough for tenants to get as creative as they wish.

This is a far cry from the boxy apartments and condos of yore, for sure. Out in the suburbs, meanwhile, multifamily housing units have many elements found in single-family homes: attached garages, great rooms, large kitchens, outside decks and so forth. Some units have square footage larger than single-family homes down the block.

Multifamily interiors are improving as buyers change their attitudes about such developments. No longer seen as a step toward a single family home, many empty nesters are moving in the opposite direction.

"We're finding buyers are more sophisticated, educated and wealthy and have more disposable income than townhouse buyers in the past," said Beth Madsen, interior designer with Roseville-based David Bernard Builders,



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Martha Dayton, design coordinator for The Lander Group, said open spaces at Ninth Street Lofts allow buyers to help create their own units with optional room dividers. Movable bookcases and kitchen islands also are available.

a division of Rottlund Homes. "They're spending more on their units than they used to and upgrading with granite countertops, wood floors and slate fireplaces."

Upgraded amenities have become more common for reasons beyond just buyer demand. Such features provide "a revenue source" for developers, said Colleen Carey, CEO of Bloomington-based Cornerstone Group.

Her own experience at Marketplace Lofts in Hopkins, where units run 1,700 square feet or

less — has shown her that people are often downsizing from suburban homes but still willing to spend extra on, say, stainless steel appliances and granite countertops in the kitchen.

AMENITIES: Changing consumer attitudes towards townhouses have driven upgrade in features

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Common trends

While downtown units try to capture a loft-like with a European style sensibility, the suburban multifamily family units inside look and feel like single-family homes, said Banks.

"The way they (architects) design downtown product after looking at the market and the way they design in the suburbs is totally different," said Wendy Banks, marketing director of the Builders Association of the Twin Cities in Roseville. "You see some of the same things, like open floor plans, but the square footage of suburban units is so large, it's like you're in a suburban home."

Still, commonalities exist. Ceilings are nine feet and higher in units downtown or the exurbs. Meanwhile, the whirlpool has been shown the door after developers discovered most buyers in the past never used them, she said, although large soaking tubs remain popular.

Surfaces in kitchens come with many upgrade options not seen in the past, ranging from granite to laminates, Banks said. Kitchen

cabinets are built of high-quality wood and bathrooms are more plentiful, she said; most units have at least two full baths.

Windows have been growing larger for years, she added, with some Minneapolis developments boasting floor-to-ceiling windows.

"There's much more attention to design," said Pete Keely, vice president of Minneapolis-based Elness Swenson Graham Architects Inc. Some of the projects that he has helped design, such as Emerald Gardens in the Prospect Park neighborhood of Minneapolis, give buyers the option of granite tops and tile floors in kitchens. "You're seeing higher priced finishes, and harder finishes," he said.

Granite countertops run more than \$3,500 in typical condominiums.

Master bedroom suites always have large closets and attached bathrooms in the suburbs, said Madsen, although city developers say that trend may be declining.

The demand for huge master bedrooms has been reduced as people come to understand they spend less time in those rooms than in other parts of a home, Keely said. Urban developments also don't necessarily have the

available square footage.

Even floors run the gamut. Cement floors in the Ninth Street Lofts allow tenants to cover them with rugs, tile, wood, carpet or nothing.

Ross Fefercorn, owner of Minneapolis-based RMF Entities Ltd. and Country Home Builders, has begun using bamboo wood floors, which he said have a "nice soft texture" and durability reminiscent of cork flooring found in 1950s era housing.

Pushing the envelope

Ninth Street Lofts offers owners a chance to customize their space and to buy furniture specially designed for project developers. The Lander Group Inc., Minneapolis, among the add-ons are designer ceiling lights, movable bookcases and kitchen islands. The islands cost an additional \$2,000 per unit, and the custom birch plywood bookcase cabinet is approximately \$2,500.

Ninth Street Lofts units also feature concrete floors, exposed brick walls and duct work, and just two enclosed spaces: bathrooms and home offices.

"What we're trying to do is leave open space

and allow buyers to really be part of creating their own space through room dividers and other options we offer," said Martha Dayton, design coordinator for The Lander Group. "People are spending more time in their homes, and they want to have a hand in creating an environment they're comfortable in."

Marketplace Lofts pushes interior design in a similar direction. The raised floor areas based on the television show *Frasier* add a spatial element, as do slanting walls and large sliding doors.

The downtown Hopkins development has just three units left in the structure, which is still under construction.

The suburbs

The major difference between urban and suburban interiors comes down mainly to space and colors. Fefercorn said suburban townhouses have open floor plans, too, often with a "great room" off a good-sized kitchen.

The townhouses Fefercorn is building at Village at Mendota Heights and Towns of New Century in Maplewood run from 1,250 to 2,400 square feet — the same kind of square

MARKETPLACE LOFTS

Hopkins

Developer: Cornerstone Group.

Units: 48, for sale

Square footage: 700-1,700 per unit

Prices: \$200,000+

Occupancy: August 2003

www.marketplacelofts.com

HARTFORD COMMONS

Eden Prairie

Developer: David Bernard Builders, a division of

Rottlund Homes

Units: 318

Square footage: 1,227-1,975 per unit

Prices: \$220,000-\$350,000

www.davidbernardbuilders.com

TOWNS OF NEW CENTURY

Maplewood

Developer: Country Home Builders

Units: 84, for sale

Square footage: 1,280-1,800 per unit

Price: \$160,000

Occupancy: Ongoing

www.countryhome-builders.com

VILLAGE AT MENDOTA HEIGHTS

Mendota Heights

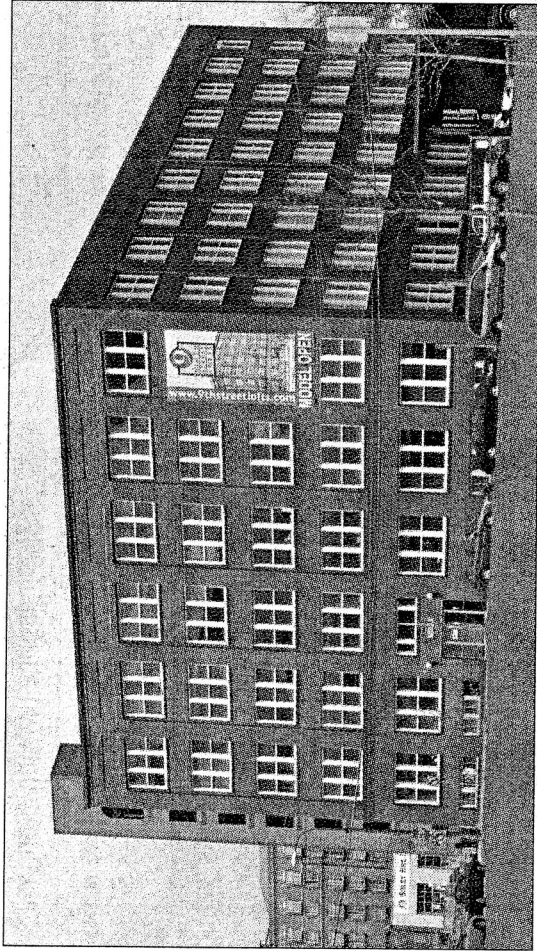
Developer: Country Home Builders

Units: 135, including townhouses (39), senior apartments (60) and lofts (36)

Square footage: 1,800-2,700 per unit

Prices: NA

Occupancy: NA



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The Ninth Street Lofts offer 10-foot ceilings and customized furniture.

footage found in many single-family homes in that community but hardly excessive by townhouse standards. Some developments in the region sell units in excess of 5,000 square feet.

At Hartford Commons in Eden Prairie, a 318-townhouse development by David Bernard, selling features include lofts that can be used for home offices and second bedrooms, brushed chrome appliances and a big master bedroom with a walk-in closet and attached bathroom, said Madsen. "Everyone wants enough room for a king-sized bed," she said.

Suburban buyers also want a private link to

NINTH STREET LOFTS

St. Paul

Developer: The Lander Group

Units: 49, for sale

Square footage: 400-1,500 per unit

Prices: \$159,000+

Occupancy: Late 2004

the outdoors, Fefercorn said. As a result, the Maplewood development has extensive porches or decks on every townhouse unit.

Frank Jossi is a St. Paul-based free-lance writer.