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How 'Fit' Is Your Building?



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Before the pandemic hit, having a well-equipped fitness center was a big marketing asset. It helped attract fitness-conscious apartment residents of all ages. As gyms now start to reopen, they again will be an important lure. Here's what you need to make them appealing and safe.

In recent years, amenities like fitness centers have proven a prime reason why residents chose one rental apartment building over another. In fact, nine out of 10 new buildings have a fitness center, and not having one even became a deal breaker, according to a Rentcafé.com survey. Today's fitness centers also gained bragging rights as they became bigger, better and more specialized than in years past.

Apartment building gyms closed their doors at the height of the pandemic and stayed closed for weeks or months thereafter. Some remain temporarily shut, while others are slowly reopening when permitted. As they do, there are a variety of strategies to employ to help users stay safe and healthy.

“We’re finding that many companies where stay-at-home orders have been lifted are reopening their gyms but limiting the number of residents who can enter their amenity space,” says Devin Wirt, CEO of TF Living, a technology-enabled amenities company in Pawley’s Island, S.C., that plans fitness centers. “This will continue for quite some time around individuals congregating in similar spaces while keeping up with rigorous cleaning schedules.

“During this time, many communities have also [partnered] with amenity providers to offer virtual amenities to keep residents engaged and active while social distancing. We personally see this as the new normal for the foreseeable future.”

Chicago-based Fifield Cos. will work closely with its management companies to establish a phased reopening of amenities, says Senior Vice President Jon Schneider, “placing the utmost importance on safety and mitigation measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 and other illnesses to residents and staff.” The company’s phase-in approach likely will closely follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and begin as stay-at-home orders are lifted, adds Schneider. “The initial phases will include intensified cleaning protocol in amenity areas, and any in-person interaction or use of equipment will likely begin by appointment only.”

The focus on gyms reflects one way that interest in wellness has surged among all demographics. The reason is simple: Staying fit leads to better physical and mental health, according health care sources and governmental reports.

Residents are delighted not to have to spend money on an outside fitness center membership. Many also like the motivation that comes from seeing others work out. During the pandemic, many apartment residents missed workouts in an official gym setting, even though they may have attended virtual classes in their apartments.

Apartment buildings have learned the importance of fine-tuning their gym message. “We state (in marketing and social media materials) that residents don’t need another membership,” says Beth Argaman, General Manager at 727 West Madison in Chicago’s West Loop neighborhood, developed by Fifield Cos. and F & F, also based in Chicago. Fitness centers also appeal because of their convenience — letting residents remain onsite — and because they provide networking possibilities, says Schneider.

Interest in fitness centers cuts across all demographics. Students residing in apartments near their colleges are extremely interested in access to a quality fitness center (along with study spaces), says Scott Orphan, Senior Vice President of Houston-based Asset Living, the country’s largest third-party manager of student apartments. Jason Wills, Chief Marketing Officer at Austin-based American Campus Communities, agrees and says that nearly all of its 203 communities have a fitness center.

When American Campus held a student focus group more than two decades ago to determine if a student community near the university’s state-of-the-art recreation center needed a fitness center, one student said yes, adding, “Sometimes I just like to get a 30-minute cardio workout within slipper distance of my unit.”

These in-building fitness centers don't have to compete with the campus rec center. However, Wills says, they "should provide space for a variety of short, healthy workouts."

But not all fitness centers are equal, and the bar keeps rising. "Today's luxury clientele expects more than just a room with a few treadmills and elliptical machines," says Victoria Shtainer, a broker with New York City-based Compass. For example, at One Bennett Park in Chicago's downtown Streeterville neighborhood, Chicago-based Related Midwest hired "starchitects" at Robert A.M. Stern to design a luxury rental and condo building with a well-outfitted fitness center, 60-foot-long indoor saltwater pool and outdoor dipping pool.

Following are nine strategies to consider when designing fitness centers:

1. Get a strong return on investment.

Incorporating an upscale fitness center doesn't come cheap, and developers should calculate the cost in the base rents they charge to ensure a good return on investment. "It comes down to doing your math," says Steve F. Hallsey, Managing Director at Wood Partners. The Atlanta-based developer considers fitness centers to be one of three critical amenities at its new developments, along with swimming pools and pet parks/spas.

2. Integrate fitness center into marketing plans.

Holly Casper, Senior Vice President of Operations for property manager RKW Residential, out of Charlotte, N.C., says fitness centers are key to her firm's marketing strategy for its 55 communities. "They're highly prioritized by our residents in their decision-making process about which apartment community they ultimately choose," she says. And Willis of American Campus thinks the trend will continue as members of Gen Z make wellness part of their daily lives, just as Millennials have. "We market the fitness center in our literature, on our website and all social media. We always make it the first stop on our tours for the 'wow' moment," he says. One of Related Management Co.'s goals in offering such an upscale mix of fitness options at One Bennett Park was for residents not just to enjoy facilities but to show them off to friends who might want to move in, says Related Regional Manager Haley Rafferty.

3. Professionally plan.

Most property managers and developers find it wise to hire third-party experts to help plan and manage fitness centers to keep them competitive, says RKW's Casper. "They're no longer a drywall vanilla box. But often a design based around a theme or reflecting trends seen at hotels and resorts," says Tom Schulz, Senior Project Manager for The Architectural Team in Chelsea, Mass., which designs fitness centers. These outside professionals know how to determine size, maximize space, diversify equipment and add extras, such as mirrors, ballet bars and towels, then make it all look attractive

and secure feedback, says Orphan of Asset Living, whose company has used this approach when planning clients' fitness classes in 10 cities.

The good news: There's a growing legion of these experts to tap, from architects and designers to fitness firms devoted exclusively to this niche such as The Wright Fit, Fit2Go Personal Training, TF Living, Advantage Fitness, Lulafit, Elevated Living and others. There's also no one-size-fits-all formula.

4. Think location.

While some fitness centers may still be located on a building's subterranean level, daylight spaces are more common and desirable, says Shtainer of Compass. And often it's not just one or two windows but a wall featuring a spectacular view. At The Cooper Southbank in Chicago, developed by Lendlease, the fitness center was situated so that different workout areas overlook the Chicago River and Southbank Park, a two-acre green space at the heart of Lendlease's seven-acre Southbank neighborhood development, says Linda Kozloski, Creative Design Director in the company's Chicago office. Stephen Santola, Executive Vice President and General Counsel of Woodmont Properties, a developer, owner, property manager and construction firm, says its Woodmont Bay Club in Bayonne, N.J., features a fourth-floor fitness center with floor-to-ceiling windows to view Newark's port.

Some fitness centers are placed to provide direct access to the outdoors. At One Bennett Park, the third-floor fitness center is located by an outdoor terrace so exercisers can take a break to enjoy fresh air or stretch. Bozzuto, out of Washington, D.C., designed its Baltimore Anthem House to offer a lawn for outdoor yoga, while its Aperture in Reston, Va., provides a wood deck for residents to soak up sun during HITT (high-intensity tactical training) routines. The best locations also permit flexibility, says Devin Wirt, founder of TF Living, a technology-enabled amenities company that plans fitness centers in 29 states. "We've suggested using rooftops, courtyards, pool decks and vacant apartments for wellness activities of all kinds," he says.

5. Go bigger and better.

The amount of square footage devoted to a fitness center is generally proportionate to a building's size, amount of space devoted to amenities and number of residents. But many newer fitness centers are larger and consist of zoned areas or even multiple spaces for different functions. Trammell Crow Residential's Alexan Winter Park (Fla.), managed by RKW Residential, has one large fitness center set up to provide the kind of high-intensity interval training equipment, from boxing to spin bikes, virtual fitness and HITT, that people experience at outside studios like Orangetheory Fitness. And although many fitness centers don't include a locker room because users live on the premises, they often feature cubbies to store belongings. Lendlease's The Cooper Southbank measures 2,230 square feet. Woodmont Property fitness centers have tripled in size to about 3,000 square feet during the past 15 years, says Santola. And

One Bennett Park's may be among the biggest, at 7,000 square feet, and includes a locker room and shower because of its pools.

Through the years, one thing about fitness center size has become clear. "The reality is that most fitness centers are never big enough," says Mary Cook of Mary Cook Associates in Chicago, a commercial interior designer who often consults with fitness expert Vinnie Saunders on fitness centers in multifamily projects. Saunders generally bases size on the metric that 60 percent of residents exercise daily. And when a gym turns out to be too small or not feature the right equipment mix, smart property managers and their experts rework what they have. The fitness center at The Sinclair, a Fifield Cos. building in Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, was constructed next to the building's theater. Through resident feedback, the property manager found the theater to be underutilized and residents desiring a weightlifting area instead. The change was made, and the weightlifting area was expanded, says Schneider.

6. Carefully select equipment and extras.

Cook says that choosing equipment according to resident demographics ensures fitness centers are used by as many residents as possible. She has learned by working with Saunders that Millennials and younger renters generally prefer structured workouts using body weights and floor space, while Boomers tend to favor a circuit line. And overall, more equipment is chosen that serves multiple rather than single functions. For example, a cable machine lets users target every muscle in their body in a variety of methods, and they're adjustable to provide bang for the buck, says Dani Singer, CEO and Director at Fit2Go Personal Training in Baltimore, which offers residents' sessions. Because of costs, Singer recommends choosing one brand with a stellar reputation and buying most pieces from that brand. "Properties will usually get a better rate and have only one manufacturer to deal with should there be issues," Singer says.

Other experts prefer a mix of companies. Because of the more sophisticated data built into today's machines, property managers and third-party experts can periodically assess which pieces are used most as well as when they might need to be replaced, which typically happens at the three-to-five-year mark. "We track usage by the serial number of each machine as well as the average time spent per workout, and rotate machines to further their life cycle, since some locations are more popular than others," says Related's Rafferty.

7. Offer programming.

Getting spaces "activated"—the buzzword for programming—helps increase the appeal of fitness centers, offers a greater sense of community and provides another marketing edge. Singer has been hired by managers to offer a week of complimentary classes when a building's fitness center opens. More and more fitness centers offer complimentary weekly classes, which represent a revenue share between provider and developer, says TF Living's Wirt, whose firm programs 700 weekly classes. 727 West Madison offers a rotation of yoga, HITT and abs core training sessions through Elevated

Living. That building also features virtual classes, with a TV in its yoga studio that can be programmed to Wellbeats' training, says Argaman. In addition, it partners with its retail tenant, Solidcore, to offer a complimentary resistance training class. Woodmont Properties organizes classes with a neighborhood trainer to support local businesses, says Santola.

And because One Bennett Park's developer owns the Equinox fitness centers, the building, at move-in and renewal times, gives residents benefits, such as complimentary bike sharing and/or discounted Equinox memberships, through its Choice Wellness program, says Rafferty. Over time, the savviest property managers learn the habits of residents to know which classes are best attended. For example, Asset knows that its student residents prefer boot camp-type fitness and yoga and personal interaction over virtual programs. "They like to get together with peers," Orphan says. Wirt has found that Midwestern residents tend to prefer a 6 p.m. start time, while those in the Northeast get going at 7 p.m.

8. Looks matter.

Although aesthetics usually relate to the building's design, architect Chris Armer, AIA, Vice President, Commercial, and Senior Project Manager at architectural firm Hoefler Wysocki, based in Kansas City, Kan., says most fitness centers now reflect a resort spa environment with a mix of soft paint and fabric colors, warm, lighting, clean lines and strategically placed mirrors. But functionality is also important, which means high enough ceilings, practical flooring dependent on use and separation of different activities into zones that can be reworked if activities change, he says.

9. Remain flexible.

Property managers and their experts know it's important to add options that have become popular. They do so in part through surveying residents. RKW asks residents when they move in and six months later about their experience at the community. Wirt expects to see more basketball courts, since they appeal to a younger demographic, and more stretch-and-tone and lower-intensity workouts for Boomers relocating to multifamily dwellings. Casper says RKW has introduced The Mirror, which residents can use on their own, and added some once-popular equipment that faded but is back again, like rowing machines. Schulz of The Architectural Team is seeing greater demand for boxing and more aerobic-style equipment and less for free weights. These same professionals not only add what is popular but remove what has become passé, as was the case with many rock-climbing walls because of the expense of having staff oversee use, says Cook. After 10 to 12 years of sweat, pumping, pounding and changing trends, or finding the size of the space is no longer adequate, a total renovation may be in order, Santola says.