

Facing pandemic, amenity-filled developments get creative



Clippership Wharf in East Boston has launched a Friday concert series that residents can enjoy from their balconies. The development is depicted here in a rendering. Lendlease

Cameron Sperance -- Boston.com correspondent

April 30, 2020 11:07 am

The residential amenities war is at a temporary détente.

Boston's building boom roared in recent years with soaring residential towers, and developers found new ways to attract people to higher rents. What began with fitness centers ballooned to restaurant-quality kitchens, art rooms, and lounges – all in the name of building community. But gatherings are a non-starter in the coronavirus era, and developers are reimagining amenities.

“It’s such a competitive environment that we’re used to being creative when it comes to amenities,” [Nick Iselin](#), Lendlease general manager of development, said. “Most of that creativity and effort has now switched to online and distance activities.”

Lendlease is the developer behind the [Clippership Wharf](#) waterfront residential complex in East Boston. Brokers would normally woo clients with features like waterfront lounges and gaming rooms, but as is the case in most Boston multifamily buildings, Clippership Wharf's communal areas are closed — even the dog park — as a precautionary measure. Instead, resident amenities are going virtual.

The developer launched a Friday concert series where a musician plays from the courtyard and residents can watch from their balconies or stream on Instagram Live. Clippership Wharf-sponsored online yoga classes are also popular with residents, Iselin said.

[Market Central](#), a residential complex in Cambridge's Central Square, hosts virtual events like painting and succulent-planting workshops. Cocktail and iPhone photography classes are also in the works, [Jonathan Andrews](#), Twining Properties development director, said.

“For the sake of our residents, we want to give them a sense of community and frankly something to do,” Andrews added. “I’d say any developer or owner should be looking at this.”

Community activities may shift easily to videoconferencing platforms, but public health guidelines will dictate how easily they transition back. Developers and architects don't expect that to leave an amenity stigma.

“I think we all hope our current conditions are not the new normalcy, but that there will be a new, new normalcy after this,” [Michelle Bleau](#), Cabot, Cabot & Forbes development manager, said. “I think we're going to absolutely have to take different measures and protocols.”

Cabot, Cabot & Forbes had almost completed the [Overlook at St. Gabriel's](#), a \$300 million residential redevelopment of the St. Gabriel's Monastery and Church in Brighton, when Mayor Marty Walsh issued a construction moratorium in March. When construction resumes, the developer will still emphasize perks like the 8,000-square-foot fitness center, lounges, and indoor basketball court, Bleau said.

Developers in recent years built smaller residences while urging tenants to socialize in beefed-up amenity spaces. Social distancing won't change that, [Vickie Alani](#), residential design expert and CBT principal, said.

“The reason you’re living in these buildings is you want to be downtown, be active, and be in these social environments,” Alani added.

As people prove they can be productive outside the office during lockdown, Alani expects some companies to loosen their stance on working from home. The architect advises a variety of clients on amenity design and said she continues to emphasize the need to add more offices in the communal areas of a residential building.

“Those work-from-home spaces will have to grow, and they’ll have to be individual spaces,” Alani said. “They will be high-tech and have fast Wi-Fi. That’ll be the differentiator: Come live here. You can work with the best equipment.”

Communal lounges and kitchens may stay, but Alani and others interviewed for this story expect a heightened level of cleaning – and heightened cleaning fees – in these public areas. Capacity levels could be reduced, and developers may look for ways to expand outdoor space to reduce density.

But nobody expects coronavirus to be the final battle in the residential amenity war.

“If you can go to the park tomorrow and sit 20 feet from someone, you would,” Alani said. “People are dying to get out of the house and see other people.”