

# The Pandemic Is Changing How The Next Wave Of Apartment Amenities Will Be Designed

The coronavirus pandemic is forcing a rethinking of the multifamily amenities so important to attracting and keeping tenants in apartments over the last decade.



Courtesy of Meshburg Group

The co-working space at Wynwood 25, a 289-unit apartment development in Miami completed in 2019. The challenge now is to design such common spaces to accommodate more social distancing — but not compartmentalize them all together, said Adam Meshburg, whose firm did the interior.

Some social distancing built into the design is going to need to be an option, though the exact nature of changes isn't clear yet.

"The open-plan hospitality vibe has been central to marketing to a millennial demographic," [The Architectural Team](#) principal Michael Liu said. "But in the present [pandemic](#), it may also be ideal for communicating disease."

Meshberg Group founder Adam Meshberg said adjusting common space to the new reality is easier said than done, because adding separation might also mean pressure to increase the size of the space. Developers will probably resist that, especially if it means any fewer units, he said.

Meshberg is in the design phase of a 700-unit project in Jersey City, New Jersey, and he is reckoning with how and if to change the plans for a post-coronavirus apartment market.

"We're rethinking its gym, which is part of the property's wellness focus," Meshberg said. "We're wondering will people want to use equipment so close to each other again? Will they want to stand on a treadmill 3 feet from another one?"

The challenge is to space equipment more without wasting space, Meshberg said. At the moment, the changes are still a matter of conversation, not solid planning, but one such conversation he is having is considering making fitness studios a little smaller.

For example, a 30-foot-by-18-foot space that might be used for a fitness class could be chopped up into smaller fitness rooms that feature mirrors or fitness-on-demand screens to keep people separate. But Meshberg said he is worried about overcorrecting.

"We don't want to chop up the multipurpose rooms into small meeting rooms that no one would want to use," he said. "Separate, but together, is how people will want to use their amenities."

It isn't exactly a new idea, he said, since millennials as often as not will occupy the same space while working alone on their computers. Amenity spaces need to build on that idea, perhaps with seating areas a little farther apart than the standard before the pandemic.

Tenants will expect changes, but not a decline in quality, Illinois-based Optima President and Principal Architect [David Hovey](#) said.

"We believe that residents will expect the full return of their amenities and services, but also changes to accommodate safe social distancing without sacrificing their experience," Hovey said.

One design strategy, at least for larger multifamily properties, will be to spread the amenities out. The 490-unit Optima Signature in Chicago, which was completed in 2017, offers 1.5 acres of amenities across four floors. That includes seven distinct fitness spaces with overflow areas, so there is space to spread out equipment and add sanitizing stations, Hovey said.

In the wake of the pandemic, outdoor amenities are also likely to become more important, designers said. The coronavirus is more easily transmitted in enclosed spaces, so all social distancing is more effective in an outdoor context – if a property has enough space.

"I can see us further increasing the amount of outdoor fitness areas," Meshberg said. "We were already doing more of it. In the tightest urban settings, there isn't room for that. But in a lot of places, it can work."

A new, 350-unit development that Meshberg is working on in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood will feature an outdoor fitness area equal in size to its indoor facility. Including more outdoor space has been given extra impetus by the a crisis that demands social distancing, he said.

An outside amenity the pandemic could put into question are community pools and spas, and in warm-weather climates like California, they have been practically mandatory. Pools are such an important part of Southern California multifamily design that building without would be hard to do, Nadel Inc. principal Patrick Winters said.

Pools tend to encourage gatherings, especially when young children are involved, which is why many pools nationwide expect to be closed, [even into the summer](#). Pool design needs serious reconsideration, Winters said, especially if the pandemic drags on.

"If we're in a situation in which we have periodical outbreaks for a year or two, God forbid, how viable will pools and spas be?" Winters said.



Bisnow/Jon Banister

The fitness center for residents in Modern at Art Place.

The trend in apartment design over the last decade or so has been a space trade-off of smaller units for bigger common spaces. Between 2008 and 2018, the average new apartment unit shrank by 5%, from just under 1K SF to under 950 SF, [according to RENTCafé](#).

"In urban environments, amenities have been paired with increasingly smaller units as residents takes a dormitory attitude toward their personal living space: The apartment is for sleeping, while the common spaces are for seeing and being seen, socializing and communicating," Liu said.

Common areas now include offerings besides gyms, pools and business centers, Mojo Stumer Associate Joe Yacobellis said. Golf simulators, poker rooms, old-style video game arcades, private dining rooms, cigar lounges, even rock-climbing walls have been designed and installed in all kinds of multifamily properties.

But designers and developers said it is too early to talk about post-pandemic apartment projects. For now, multifamily starts have slowed down. In March, starts were down 32.1% compared with February, [according to the U.S. Census Bureau](#).

The good news, Liu said, is many of the modifications to make apartment living safer from infectious disease are already happening, with the promotion and adoption of [Passive House](#), WELL Building and other green building standards. The pause will give designers and their clients time to rethink what amenities will still be wanted in a post-pandemic environment.

"It's unlikely that common amenity space will go away, but there will be modifications to allow for increased compartmentalization, such as by using discrete, demountable screens or doors," said Yacobellis, who designed the common areas at the two-building, 1,115-unit multifamily development 5Pointz Towers in [Long Island City](#), among other projects.

Space that functions as a common work area will also need to be modified, especially in light of its future as a [more important amenity than ever](#) with more people working from home more often, [even after the pandemic abates](#).

"Before the pandemic, we knew the trend of working from home was increasing, and we saw many residents using our larger amenity spaces for work," [Security Properties](#) Manager, Marketing & Design Strategies Courtney Ray said.

"For our new projects still in design, we're experimenting with adding more, separate and smaller coworking spaces," she said. "That idea is quickly moving from experiment to priority."

Seattle-based Security Properties currently owns more than 23,500 multifamily units, with more than 1,400 under development in Oregon and Washington state.

Common areas might not be the only space that changes to accommodate the new working-at-home paradigm, said Winters, whose Los Angeles-based architectural firm is working on multifamily projects in Hollywood, Long Beach and near [Sacramento](#).

"There may be more thought given to how one or even two people can work in a dwelling unit more seamlessly," Winters said.

The placement of an alcove or a niche that establishes some separation from the rest of the unit, even if only a psychological one, could become more common, he said. Individual apartments could be modified to improve their natural compartmentalization, Liu

added. Apartment entry doors may be made tighter, and with more outside air introduced into the apartments themselves.

"Our experience working from home has shown how important it is to carve out designated space for oneself, even if there are no physical walls, to help create mental boundaries between work and home," CetraRuddy co-founder Nancy Ruddy said.