Courtyards offer an inviting retreat for apartment dwellers

By Pamela Dittmer McKuen, Chicago Tribune
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One of the key attractions to apartment and condominium living is not having a yard to mow.

One of the key drawbacks to apartment and condominium living is not having a yard to play in.

Several new communities in the Chicago area are offering tenants and owners all the fun without the hassle. Their site plans arrange residential buildings around a recreational courtyard designed with outdoor leisure in mind. The specific amenities vary from community to community, but the maintenance and landscaping chores are handled by the management.

The courtyard concept is "part of our overall plan to not only sell an apartment, but to sell a lifestyle," said developer David Strosberg, president at Chicago-based Morningside Group.

At Morningside's Wheaton 121, a 306-unit apartment community in Wheaton, the courtyard is appointed with a heated swimming pool, sun deck, cabanas, barbecue grill, fire pit, dog run, Wi-Fi and seating areas.

Those amenities were a huge incentive for residents Kerrigan Byrne and Matt Smith, who moved in May from Oak Park. They first looked at other communities, but Wheaton 121 "blew everything else out of the water," Byrne said. "The price was similar to what we were paying already and had more features."

This summer, the couple logged many hours in the courtyard. Byrne, who was job hunting, often lounged by the

pool. Smith plays "bags," called "corn hole" where he grew up in southern Indiana, and frequently grills dinners. Their apartment overlooks the courtyard, so they can watch the goings-on from their balcony.

"We've made a lot of friends here by meeting them in the courtyard," Byrne said. "One night we all got together for a big grill-out. Some were doing steaks and chicken. We did crab legs, and everyone brought something to the table."

Wheaton 121 offers studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments from $1,260 to $3,700 per month.

Strosberg said tenant response to the Wheaton courtyard has been so positive that Morningside is replicating its design at two more rental communities: Elmhurst 255 in Elmhurst and NorthShore 770 in Northbrook.

"We believe the amenities we are offering are the differential advantage of the 2014 modern property that residents will pay a premium for," he said.

Indianapolis-based Flaherty and Collins Properties has built several courtyard communities throughout the country. The developer's first entry in the Chicago-area market is Ninety7Fifty on the Park, a 295-unit rental community in Orland Park.

"For us, it's about meeting what residents demand in a high-end amenity package, from the courtyard to the interiors," said Chris Kirles, vice president of development. "There is a lot of competition out there, so when a prospective tenant walks in the door, there has to be a wow factor."

Apartment residents are typically short-term residents who are going through some sort of transition in their lives, he said.

"They want to socialize and interact and meet people and have a good experience overall," he said. "We have a great mix of people, and they all use the amenities."

Ninety7Fifty on the Park circles two courtyards, which are separated by a parking garage. One is the pool courtyard, outfitted with a heated swimming pool, sun deck, boccie ball court, hammocks, two grilling stations, a fire pit and large-screen TV lounge with retractable sunshade. In the second courtyard are a fountain, dog run, pet wash, grilling station, fire pit and seating.

"Some people want to be right by the pool and in the action," Kirles said. "Others want a setting that is a little quieter."

Ninety7Fifty offers one- and two-bedroom apartments from $1,375 to $2,400 per month.

The courtyard at the new AMLI Lofts rental building at 850 S. Clark St. in Chicago has taken on historical significance, according to Stephen Ross, executive vice president of development for AMLI Residential.

"During the development of AMLI Lofts, we adopted the concept of connecting the turn-of-the-century South Loop neighborhood with our next-century development by utilizing historic materials found on the original building site," he said. "We saved hundreds of 125-plus-year-old granite pavers from old LaSalle Street and repurposed them throughout the courtyard space. All of the facing stone around the grills, planters, fire pits and seating are created from restored pavers. And there will be signage in the space indicating the history of the materials."

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The midrise development presents an intimate setting for viewing the surroundings.

"Residents at AMLI Lofts are able to connect and expand their smaller living spaces with large common areas, allowing them to live small and live large at the same time," Ross said. "The outdoor amenity space transitions seamlessly from the indoor areas and includes the pool deck, dog park, basketball court, rooftops and multiple gathering spaces with fire pits and barbecue areas. In a dense urban environment such as the South Loop, it is important to have green space available to our residents."

AMLI Lofts consists of two 11-story buildings with 199 units in each. The development offers convertible units and one- and two-bedroom apartments from $1,766 to $2,960 per month.

Another rental community with an amenity courtyard is the 310-unit Avant at the Arboretum in Lisle. Within its confines are a heated swimming pool and sun deck, plus a patio with two grilling stations, dining and bar areas, a fire pit and cushioned furniture groupings. Not only do the tenants flock to the courtyard to lounge, but the management hosts resident events such as dinners and wine tastings there, said leasing professional Crystal Campos.

"It's a great place to get everyone together," she said. "Our residents want to get to know their neighbors, and we want to know them."

Avant at the Arboretum offers one- and two-bedroom apartments from $1,197 to $1,767 per month.

Easton Park is a 270-unit town home community in Carol Stream built around the 4-acre Great Lawn Park. Multiple walking paths meander through the landscaping, which is dotted with gazebos, arbors and sitting areas.

Four floor plans are available with two to four bedrooms and 11/2 to 31/2 baths. Starting prices range from the low $200,000s to the low $300,000s.

"In town home living, you don't have the true sense of a backyard," said Cheryl Bonk, vice president of sales and marketing for the Naperville-based developer M/I Homes of Chicago. "This amenity offers the opportunity to enjoy a large open space and to get out and exercise without having to maintain it. It helps create a good kind of family life."

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