

MULTIFAMILY

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EXECUTIVE

MASTERFUL AMENITIES:

Creative Treatments for
Common Areas

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GREAT REMAKES

Capture Residents and Revenue
With Smart, Stylish Renovations

DP&L Flats
Hamilton Properties

Plus:
Savvy
Spending

Freshen Up
Your Kitchens
and Baths

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Before



[After]



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Volume 11, number 4, Multifamily Executive (ISSN 1089-4721) is published monthly (semi-monthly in March and November) by Hanley Wood, LLC, One Thomas Circle, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20005 and is printed in the USA. Copyright 2006 by Hanley Wood, LLC. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MULTIFAMILY EXECUTIVE, PO Box 3495, Northbrook, IL 60065-3495



Curb Appeal

Spruce up your landscaping to attract new residents.

If Curtis R. Kemeny has learned one thing in his years as a multifamily manager and developer, it's that first impressions matter. "When someone drives up to a piece of property, an essential set of visuals washes over them," says the president of Boston Residential Group, whose family has been developing properties in downtown Boston and its western suburbs for three generations. "That first impression is the most important. The way a property is maintained and organized—the exterior of the buildings, the landscaping, the driveways—those things hit people all at once to form an impression before they open the front door. You either turn them off or turn them on with that first impression."

Curb appeal is especially important with renovated properties. Fix up the outside of a building and you signal prospective residents—or buyers—that something new is afoot, which can be crucial when it comes to projects that have seen better days. It's also a way to meet the changing needs of today's market, which demands plenty of (preferably) unobtrusive parking as well as parks, jogging trails, courtyards, well-lit common areas, and other outdoor amenities.

That was the case with Linden Square Townhomes, a 64-unit rental complex located a mile from downtown Wellesley, Mass. Boston Residential Group recently put \$4.4 million into revamping what had been a tired, 1960s-era, garden-style community, with a bulk of the dollars going toward new landscaping, parking, lighting, curbing, sidewalks, stone walls, signage, and fencing.

"It was a very moderately priced apartment complex that was in really poor condition," says Joe Geller, founder and partner of Geller DeVellis, the Boston-based landscape architecture and civil engineering firm that carried out the work at Linden Square. "It had just been used up."

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: In Los Angeles, exterior improvements played a major role in Sebrén Development's renovation of an 18-unit rental building not far from Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

The biggest improvement Geller and project manager Phil Pryor made at Linden Square was a system of fencing and trellises that gave each unit a private backyard and helped identify each townhome's main entrance. To ensure long-term low maintenance, Geller went with a vinyl product, something the landscape architect had shied away from before. "We used a cream-colored, textured pattern, which was excellent," says Geller. "It didn't have that horrible shine that you get with white vinyl, and it matched the trim of the units, which made everything blend together nicely."

Now, Linden Square is attracting residents on both ends of the age spectrum: empty-nesters and young singles and couples, two demographics to which Kemeny pays attention. "These two segments are bringing their own sensibilities toward the outside of the property and the grounds, and that plays into the decisions they make about where they

BIG BUCKS: Boston Residential Group spent \$4.4 million updating Linden Square Townhomes, a rental complex in Wellesley, Mass.

want to live, but for different reasons," he says. "Retirees are bringing their house sensibility to an apartment. They're coming from the nicer suburbs where they spent a fair amount of money making the outside of their home look nice. That's the lens through which they look at our properties." By contrast, he says, younger people with active lifestyles want access to parks and trails for recreation.

For Kemeny, investing in the outside of a property makes good business sense. "You get a higher quality tenant, higher rents, and tenants who stay longer," says Kemeny. "With Linden Square, our rents are up almost 30 percent, we have no vacancies, and our marketing expenses have gone way down. We don't have to give away free rent, amenities, or broker's fees."

In Los Angeles, Brendan McDermott, CEO of Sebren Development, is equally



convinced that pumped-up curb appeal can mean a pumped-up bottom line. His company specializes in the identification, acquisition, and redevelopment of undervalued urban infill properties, most notably small 1930s- and '40s-era rental complexes located west of downtown L.A. and south of the Hollywood sign. McDermott and his partner, company president Sebastian Rein, put a lot of work into the exterior of their properties. "If the design is to generate high income," says McDermott, "then you have to make the outside presentable."

Typically, Sebren tackles an exterior with new paint, landscaping (lighting,

sprinklers, plantings, fountains, seating), sidewalks, and any security measures deemed necessary. All of those elements went into the renovation of an 18-unit property on Hollywood Boulevard, just a quarter-mile from Grauman's Chinese Theatre. "It was built in the mid-'40s and had a fantastic location, but it was really under-managed and neglected," says McDermott. "By performing work outside and renovating the units, we increased the rental income by approximately 60 percent. Renovating the units is only half the battle. Curb appeal is very important."

For Sebren's projects, which number upwards of 30 for the four-year-old company, exterior paint is almost always a must. "We go for a well-designed color scheme with every building, very classic and clean," says McDermott. "We don't buy some over-run paint colors at Home Depot and just throw it on. If you paint the exterior, it looks like you have new management in place, which can change the vibe at a building—especially if it's located in a rougher part of town. It sends a real message to the neighborhood." [M]

Kathleen Stanley is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C.

Yard Smarts

When a desert-area property renovation calls for new landscaping, consider a water-conserving design.

When it comes to properties located in drier parts of the country, it pays for owners to keep the seven water-conserving principles of Xeriscape in mind when renovating: good design, efficient irrigation systems, use of mulch, soil preparation, appropriate turf, water-efficient plant material, and appropriate maintenance. These are the principles that drive Rod Pappas, president of Xeriscapes Unlimited, a landscape firm based in Phoenix, Ariz.

"We need to revert back to the desert-type landscaping that we had years ago," says Pappas, speaking by telephone on Phoenix's 101st day of

no rain. "It's not only the good-neighbor thing to do, but it's also the sensible and practical thing to do. Another upside to indigenous landscaping is it's chic. If you want to be cool and modern and look like some of the upscale buildings around here, then stick to the basic Xeriscape principles."

Turf, Pappas admits, is one area that's often misunderstood when it comes to water-conserving landscape plans. "By all means, don't take out all the turf," says Pappas. "I like to keep a little bit of green, even in the desert. We leave turf in select areas to soften the building, especially in entryways and courtyards. You can do as much with 500 square

feet of turf as you can with 5,000."

Pappas also recommends that property owners look into programs that local governments often offer in the way of rebates for reduced water usage. The city of Tempe, Ariz., for example, gives financial incentives for projects that realize water savings of 15 percent or more. "I did a \$60,000 turf conversion job for a church in Tempe, and just today they called to say they'd received a rebate check for \$16,000," says Pappas of a job that also saved the church more than 30 percent on water consumption.

Still, all the advance work can be for nothing without appropriate maintenance. "We do a lot of turf reduction jobs," Pappas notes, "but if somebody doesn't go out there and maintain the irrigation system, you're not going to walk away with any advantages at all." [M]