



Aria Denver is a new multifamily townhouse development dedicated to healthy, sustainable living.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

How multifamily developers are reinventing the American Dream

» MICHELLE KAUFMANN

Where does the American Dream live? Most often we imagine it living in a large single-family home situated atop an equally large emerald lawn offering privacy from our neighbors. Yet that seems oddly un-American somehow. With our reputation for almost overfriendly affability, it's puzzling that we are so keen to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and our neighbors.

The new housing developments peppering our growing suburbs have an almost misanthropic quality. Our habit is to shun denser living situations as soon as we have the means (or even before, as evidenced by some of the lending practices that got our country into the current financial mess).

People fear the implications of denser living because of the associations it has with public housing projects, poverty and crime. But thoughtfully designed developments avoid these pitfalls and offer an incredible number of advantages. They can be beautiful and comfortable as well as more convenient, affordable and environmentally sustainable than traditional

developments, especially when they are close to shops, restaurants and other amenities.

One only needs to take a good look at existing sustainably designed multifamily communities to understand why they could be the future of the housing industry. Somerset Parkside in Sacramento, Calif., a 107 dwelling community designed by Sym "godfather of Green building" Van der Ryn's EcoDesign Collaborative, is one terrific example. The passive solar building design optimizes energy use while the downtown location lessens residents' dependence on their cars. The design also does a wonderful job of integrating the landscape, with its centrally located canopy of trees and private yards for each unit, as well as shared gardens and recreation areas.

An exceptionally Green community is IBIS's Florence Lofts in Sebastopol, Calif. This LEED-certified community is within walking distance of downtown Sebastopol and adjacent to public transportation. During construction, much of the waste was recycled back into the site as biodegradable mulch and soil amendments. The buildings incorporate Green materials such as recycled steel framing, concrete with fly-ash and Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood. Designed for energy efficiency, the buildings' windows are positioned to take advantage

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of solar gain in the winter but are then shielded from it during the summer. Atop the roofs sits PV film, which produces the majority of the electricity consumed onsite. The landscape is irrigated with a graywater system, and other water-saving features include dual-flush toilets, low-flow plumbing fixtures and low-maintenance landscaping.

One community currently in the works and worth keeping an eye on is William McDonough's Greenbridge development in Chapel Hill, N.C. The under-construction multifamily community utilizes a "positive development strategy for suburban areas" that discourages sprawl. It is located close to existing town centers and intended to be a multiuse residential and retail development that enables residents to reach amenities on foot. Greenbridge, like Somerset Parkside, takes advantage of passive solar design. Even the roofs will be suffused with eco-friendliness: They can be used to grow food, generate power for the community, and be yet another space for residents to play and relax outdoors.

Our own company is working on some exciting Green communities that focus on sustainable environmental, financial and social innovation.

Located in Colorado's Mile High City, Aria Denver is one such multifamily development. This community will be a mixture of residential, retail and office space as well as a combination of affordable and market-rate units. It will incorporate shared parks, communal organic gardens, geothermal alternative energy sources and high-performance energy systems, as well as beautiful sustainable materials and strategies.

It's no surprise that the benefits of multifamily communities are gaining notice. In addition to the reduced ecological footprint a well-designed community achieves, there are lifestyle advantages to consider. More and more, retiring baby boomers are seeking new living situations that easily allow them to remain active and social. They are looking for low-maintenance homes in walkable communities with essential services and amenities nearby. At the same time, members of Generation Y are looking to buy homes that let them maintain a good work/life balance. They're demanding more urban-like community living that allows them to walk or bike to work and live near friends, even at the cost of a larger lot.

It's time to abandon the antiquated notion of living out the American Dream in a big home on a sprawling estate and turn to other, sustainable options such as multifamily communities. 🏡



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