First Impressions  Published: September 02, 2009

By Jeffrey Steele, Contributing Editor

In the universe of multifamily properties, some apartment communities just stand out from the rest. These are often the properties with great curb appeal, the much sought-after quality known to exert a powerful hold over renters. It is curb appeal that lures new residents, and at the same time makes it difficult for existing ones to depart.

In building curb appeal, there’s an indispensable trick-of-the-trade, says Jamie Gorski, senior vice president of corporate marketing for The Bozzuto Group, a Greenbelt, Md. real estate firm with almost 100 apartment properties across the U.S. It involves snapping a color photo of a community and converting it to black and white.

Once the vibrant, multi-hued image is reduced to stark blacks, whites and grays, the out-of-place garbage can, the dying tree, the misplaced sign and the barren spot in the lawn suddenly loom into clear focus. “It’s surprising,” Gorski says with a laugh. “It’s an easy exercise. You come to the property every day, and you lose your ability to see it objectively. So you see it through that photo. I’ve done it for years.”

There’s every reason to study curb appeal very closely. It is not only a key to attracting new residents and retaining existing ones, but also to boosting the bottom line and net operating income, as well as marketing more effectively. And it’s one essential element property managers cannot let slide in an economic downturn.

Curb appeal defined

While definitions of curb appeal vary, most multifamily experts agree it boils down to first impressions. “To me, it’s that first impression when customers are looking at your community,” Gorski says. “It’s everything from your landscaping to your signage to the cleanliness of the property. All of these encompass curb appeal.”

James Burnett, FASLA, president of The Office of James Burnett, a Solona Beach, Calif. landscape architecture firm, echoes the thought. “It’s extremely important, because it’s the first impression,” he says. “People make up their minds within the first 10 seconds of entering a
Property whether they want to live there or not.”

Curb appeal plays a crucial role in every step of the prospective resident’s first journey into the property, adds Jill Pilaroscia, principal of San Francisco’s Jill Pilaroscia Colour Studio. “It seems to start with the brand,” says Pilaroscia, whose firm works with property managers to establish their properties’ most effective color palettes.

“Every [community] has an identifying name... Every building or cluster of buildings has a name that suggests an idea. So it starts with brand and project name. What’s critical for curb appeal is that all aspects of the property resonate with the brand name,” asserts Pilaroscia.

“That may mean the way the monument sign—the big sign signaling a community—is composed, what colors and typeface it features and what it’s constructed of.”

The leasing office is generally the next step beyond this entry point, and here appearance must again resonate with the property’s brand, she says.

“I was at a project last week where we’re re-coloring a rental site of about 500 units,” she says. “I arrived at the leasing office simultaneously with the owner-client, who reached for the door handle and said, ‘How fabulous! They polished the brass!’ It made him so happy. And then you start to notice the windows are all clean, the floor is swept in the entry, and you get a feeling of the pride of ownership. It was so telling.”

What Pilaroscia calls “variety of experience” is also part of curb appeal in multifamily rental properties. That’s achieved in part by creating a range of colors that supports the style of the property’s architecture. “The right color scheme for a property depends on its architecture and its given elements,” she says. “If you can see the roof, the color of the roof factors in. The colors of the paving and hardscapes factor in. The windows and window finishes, whether aluminum or stained wood frames, factor in... all of these given conditions factor in to how you approach creating a color scheme. A typical developer palette will consist of between three and five colors.”

Curb appeal delivered
Outstanding curb appeal has an enormous impact on the bottom line, on net operating incomes and on resident attraction and retention, Gorski says. “If you don’t have good curb appeal, you won’t have customers,” she asserts.

“It can affect your bottom line tremendously. Customers will continue to drive by or walk by, but won’t stop in. Everyone takes in that first impression and decides whether they are going to stop or keep right on going. It’s extraordinarily important.”

Superior curb appeal spells the difference between gaining and losing prospects who may look at four, five or more apartment communities, Pilaroscia adds. Eye-catching landscaping, site lighting, even the look of the [unit] numbers, are all crucial elements that stick in prospects’ minds. “If they look well-maintained, you know people are going to be interested in leasing the units and staying in the units,” she says.

Effective curb appeal can have an impact on the attraction and retention of not just residents, but of employees as well. The best employees and most skilled leasing agents all want to be associated with the most attractive properties, Pilaroscia says.

In addition, curb appeal lends confidence to a marketing stance. The Bozzuto Group, for instance, makes sure photos spotlighting the curb appeal of its communities appear throughout its Website, online ads, print materials and other marketing efforts. Curb appeal is conveyed not just in photography, but in such promotional language as “beautiful, mature landscaping” or “rustic New England-style architecture,” Gorski says.

**Curb appeal described**

Curb appeal has been a significant factor in the success of Chicago’s Lakeshore East, a $4 billion, 28-acre, mixed-use infill development steps from the Windy City’s famed Michigan Avenue and sparkling new Millennium Park, as well as the Chicago River and Lake Michigan. Contributing hugely to curb appeal is The Park at Lakeshore East, a six-acre park serving as the “front lawn” for many of Lakeshore East’s residents.

The park offers a children’s play area, a “great lawn” for softball games, a dog area and contemplative places where people can reflect while
relaxing near a fountain.

"It’s really quite spectacular," says Burnett, whose firm was the design landscape architect on the park project. “The curb appeal works on a lot of levels. Look out from your condominium, and you can get the experience of the park without even going there. On a Saturday, you can get coffee and walk leisurely through the park. The lighting at night kind of expresses the form of the park. It’s something you can’t miss.”

The park’s success is evident in the fact that Lakeshore East’s units with views directed westward toward the park and city skyline have filled up about as fast as those looking toward the nearby lake and river. “People tend to think water always sells first,” Burnett says. “I don’t think it’s the case here. Prospective residents are impressed by seeing people experiencing that park as part of their daily lives in the city.”

For many, if not most, in the multifamily industry, curb appeal refers not only to what is seen from the curb, but also how people respond to other exterior features. Case-in-point is the roof garden of Aqua, an 80-story, mixed-use building in Lakeshore East. Open since June, Aqua features a broad three-story pedestal at ground level, topped by 77 stories of hotel rooms, apartments and condos.

Prospective residents can easily picture themselves lounging around the 80,000-square-foot garden’s pool, jogging its one-fifth-mile-long running track, sipping wine around the firepit on a cool fall evening or barbecuing with friends on a hot summer day. The garden’s curb appeal has a subtly seductive, psychological effect on them.

“It’s about the imagination more than anything else,” says Ted Wolff, principal of Chicago’s Wolff Landscape Architecture Inc. “It’s not so much if they will actually use it. It’s about tickling their imagination, and getting them to imagine themselves doing all the activities—that’s what makes [prospects] want to live there.”

In Los Angeles, two art deco murals by artist April Greiman add color and personality to the exterior of Wilshire Vermont Station (this month’s cover shot), a mixed-use, transit-oriented community built by MacFarlane Partners and Urban Partners. The property, designed by Arquitectonica, features 449 apartments and 36,000 square feet of retail space. It’s managed by Riverstone Residential.
No time to cut corners

In struggling economies, it may be tempting to skimp on creating and maintaining curb appeal. But that temptation should be resisted. “Good design kind of differentiates itself at this point, when times are tough,” Burnett says. “Developments being built now and focusing on getting the elements right, including landscape, are the ones that are going to come out ahead. From a business perspective, good landscape design is sustainable. It breeds success. It supports strong marketing.”

Or, as Gorski says, “Curb appeal is effective. We all know it. It is not a good place to cut your marketing dollars.”