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DESIGN AWARD APARTMENT

Builder: Crescent Corporation
Architects: Bouillion & Williams
Location: Seattle
Good design and planning in an apartment can spell the difference between full occupancy and a well-weathered “vacancy” sign.

The apartment on these pages proves the point. On a site bounded on several sides by non-residential property, Crescent Corporation built an investment project that had a waiting list the day it opened and has never had a vacancy since.

What are the reasons for this success? Crescent’s president, builder Rudy Simone, gives some answers:

"First, we knew our market from experience rather than from professional research—we had built almost 40 apartments in Seattle over the last 7 years. We knew the demand for smartly designed but low to moderate rental apartments existed and would continue to exist.

"The land cost was relatively low—only about $1,000 per projected unit. But the problem was what to build and how to build it in order to assure full occupancy.

"We went to architects Bouillon & Williams who had done previous work for us and gave them our program: to come in with approximately 35 units at no more than $10,000 each in a 3-floor walk-up. Zoning density determined the number of apartments possible on the lot and our building code limited us to three floors.

"The real challenge was to evolve a design smart enough to have appeal in an area surrounded by several less-than-desirable land uses. Fortunately one expanse looked out on sloping vacant land and we hoped this could be utilized." (In verdant Seattle most vacant land looks like other cities’ landscaped parks.)

The Design

"We had to find a way to minimize the view on three sides; yet we wanted every apartment to open onto some kind of pleasant view and to have a balcony or deck for outdoor living." Architect Bouillon explains that their solution of a single-loaded corridor plan with the structure wrapped in a semi-circle around the pool-court solved every basic problem. All apartments have views down to the court or out to the one park-like view. Only the “end” apartments have a direct line of sight to other balconies across the pool-court and since the distance is 114 feet this is not a problem.

Walls facing the interior court practically solved themselves—glass from floor to ceiling. "We selected..."
hinged glass panel doors rather than sliding simply because they worked out better with our design module," according to Boullion.

"For the outside walls of the semi-circle we wanted to find an exterior surfacing that would unify the structure and minimize the 'holes-in-the-wall' appearance you get with many doors and small windows."

This was achieved with gold anodized aluminum screening which completely sheathes the three upper floors. The screening wasn't inexpensive, but it solves a number of problems. It provides a dramatic, unified exterior that is rich and warm in color; it furnishes light and air (and limited outside view) to the corridors, yet because of its louvered effect, protects them from rain.

Individual apartments are conventional except for their slightly splayed walls. There are 36 one-bedroom units and only 3 with two-bedrooms.

A convenient utility room with individual storage lockers and a coin-operated washer and dryer is located on each floor. Study the floor plan to see how the utility room and a stairway were adroitly incorporated in one bay between each two-bedroom apartment and an adjoining one-bedroom unit.

Construction

The structure is a conventional wood frame with the cantilevered corridors and balconies detailed in steel. A wide-flange steel column at each bay provides support and anchorage for the cantilevered beams.

Typical one-bedroom units above, left, show neat trim appearance with popular open-trim appearance with popular open pass-through buffet between kitchen and dining area. Apartments are furnished only with range, refrigerator and carpeting.

Laundry-utility room, combined with a storage locker room, as shown at the left, is located on each floor. Apartments are all electric radiant heated with ceiling cable system and each has its own meter in master utility room.

Individual unit plan on opposite page illustrates how stairway, plus laundry-storage room were fitted into half of one bay, leaving additional space for two-bedroom apartment without interrupting modular planning system.
supporting the corridors. Corridors and decks are built with corrugated steel panels overlaid with a 3 1/2-inch light-weight concrete deck.

Sound conditioning consists of 4-inch glass fiber blankets between floors and 2-inch blankets between party walls plus clip-attached gypsum lath and plaster on walls as well as ceilings. About this, Simone says, "After building 40 apartments, I have come to the conclusion that this is the best system for providing sound insulation between apartment units at a reasonable cost. I'm convinced that the nail is one of the best sound conductors known to man—and this system eliminates the chance of even one nail carrying sound from one unit to the next."

Data
Raw Land Cost: $20,000
Land Development Cost: $20,000
Construction Cost $345,000

Individual unit cost:
1-bedroom unit: $ 9,000
2-bedroom unit: $10,600

Rents:
1-bedroom units: $ 97.50
2-bedroom units: $125.00

In summing up the record for this apartment project, Simone claims, "Good architectural design, outstanding sound control, and a competitive rent structure are our greatest assets—the design draws our renters in to look, the rents appeal to their pocketbooks, the sound privacy keeps them happy. We won't build an investment unit unless we know that 50% occupancy will cover our mortgage payments. With the promise of continued 100% occupancy, this apartment meets that requirement—and then some."

Expanded aluminum screening sheathes corridors on perimeter of the semi-circular apartments. An important bonus of this plan on a hillside site:
1st floor occupants can park on same level as their apartments;
2nd floor occupants have own "ground floor" access via bridge shown above;
3rd floor residents park on upper level, have only one flight of steps to their apartments,

Detail drawings at right illustrate typical construction technique and unique method of hanging steel balconies and corridors from structural steel columns at each apartment bay.