

Building adaptability into BTR

By Helen Crane Thu 3 September 2020

One of the build-to-rent (BTR) sector's biggest selling points are the amenities.



10 George Street: Canary Wharf Group's BTR arm Vertus opened its first building weeks before the pandemic

As the market has grown, the likes of cinema rooms, gyms and co-working spaces – as well as a host of weirder and more wonderful options – have become standard features. After all, these shared spaces are one of the main differences between renting in a BTR scheme and from a buy-to-let landlord.

It's fair to say that social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a massive spanner in the works. Most amenities were closed during

the early days of lockdown, and although they are reopening now, many have reduced capacity.

Conversely, outdoor spaces – whether a balcony, roof terrace or garden – have been in high demand. Co-working spaces have also proved popular in recent weeks, as more people have become comfortable enough to leave their apartments while still working at home.

So, do developers now need to rethink the design of their blocks and the amenities they provide?

“While investment in [BTR] has grown considerably over the last five years, there are lots of schemes still in planning and development,” says Rosie Ashton, an architect in CBRE’s multifamily consultancy.

“Our response to Covid and its impact on how we live now will influence the developments completing over the next few years.”

Encouragingly, those on the ground report that residents are still using amenity space – just in a more careful way. “The spaces are more bookable, it’s more organised and the density is lower,” says Russell Pedley, co-founder of architects Assael, who has worked on BTR schemes including Legal & General’s Blackhorse Mills in Walthamstow. There, even the swimming pool has reopened thanks to a new booking system.

‘Virtual community’

Vertus, Canary Wharf Group’s BTR arm, opened its first building at 10 George Street in mid-February just weeks before the lockdown. Alastair Mullens, head of Vertus, says it created a “virtual community” for residents during lockdown and has now made amenities bookable, moved around

furniture to support social distancing and reduced the size of events such as fitness classes.

“It is really important for our residents to be able to continue using these areas in a safe manner,” Mullens says, describing them as “the heartbeat of life at 10 George Street”.



East Village: Get Living says residents value amenities that are ‘an extension out of their apartments’

Different amenities pose different challenges, however. Christian Armstrong, director of brand, product and technology at Get Living, says residents are really valuing amenities that are “an extension out of their apartments”, such as the sky garden at its Elephant Central scheme. This is supported by anecdotal reports that some operators are looking to up their amenity provision due to demand from residents. However, Armstrong says “highly communal spaces” like cinemas are “more difficult to provide” at the moment.

Flexible spaces

Wisely, those drawing up new BTR developments are designing in flexible spaces that can be adapted to more than one use. Before coronavirus, some developers had started to build 'shell' amenity spaces that they could adapt over time based on residents' needs – but in the Covid era spaces could change use in the space of a single day.

John Badman, director at global architecture, planning and design practice CallisonRTKL, envisions “adaptive spaces that can change by the hour – yoga in the morning, co-working space at lunch and a pop-up bar in the evening”.

Assael has been asked to carry out 'audits' on amenity space in BTR developments since the pandemic took hold, and has added features such as wider corridors and separate up and down staircases to enable social distancing.

“It's important to think about design resilience,” says Pedley. “Right now, the issue might be social distancing because of Covid, but in future the space could be holding a large-capacity event and those features would still be beneficial.”

Covid's impact will influence developments in the next few years

Rosie Ashton, CBRE

Others see less need to hedge their bets. “Will BTR residents still use cinemas and gyms? Sure they will,” says Graham Bates, senior director strategy – Europe at LIV Group. “This will pass. Design should be about what is right for the building and the target demographic.”

One amenity everyone agrees BTR needs to factor in, whether in apartments or in the communal space is a functional place to work.

“If you’re working from home, things like fast internet, co-working spaces, a gym and on-site food and beverage are a benefit,” says John Dunkerley, chief executive of BTR investor Apache Capital Partners.

He adds that Covid has “probably accelerated” the letting of its Angel Gardens scheme in Manchester, which is now more than 50% occupied.

Demand for workspace could see a shift in priorities in terms of BTR amenities, believe some.

“Where once you might have found a cinema room, in future it will be a printing room complete with stationery cupboard, while the bookable dining room will double as a virtual boardroom,” says Badman.

“The concierge will offer IT support, while phone booths might pop up along corridors to allow meetings and video calls to be taken privately.”

Schemes at the design stage certainly look to be including more co-working space. “We are advising clients to design spaces for co-working and in some cases, spaces previously allocated for commercial use are now being repurposed,” says Bates.

Repurposing space

Operators are also rushing to repurpose space in existing buildings. Get Living, for example, is converting its front offices into workspace.

“We’re starting to see the fabric of the community come together,” says Armstrong.

“You can’t artificially create a community, but people working from home more is contributing to that.”

Not everyone wants to work collectively, though, particularly in this time of social distancing – and this could prompt a rethink of how space is allocated inside individual flats.

Because of the economic imperative for critical mass in BTR schemes, it is unlikely we will ever see studies being provided en masse.

“It’s probably going to be more down to intelligent design rather than increasing floor areas,” says Mark Clegg, international partner at Cushman & Wakefield.



Angel Gardens: Apache Capital Partners says Covid-19 ‘probably accelerated’ the letting of its Manchester scheme

Pedley adds that “something like a cupboard opening or a space in front of a bay window” could become a functional desk space, while Lesley Roberts, executive development director at Allsop, says the whole layout of apartments could be radically changed to create a true hybrid space.

“I think we might see more ‘work-live’ units like we saw in east London in the 1980s and 90s,” she says. “It’s the sort of thing that BTR could embrace.”

Residents are also becoming more discerning about the specifications of their apartments, having spent so much time in them.

“They’ve been paying more attention to things like the quality of light, aspect, fresh air, biophilic design and layout,” Roberts says.

One element that comes up time and time again is the need for outdoor space. During lockdown, the divide between those with proper balconies and those without was thrown into sharp relief, and as such, private outdoor space has become a priority for those developing or investing in BTR.

“Conversations I’ve had with developers and investors over the past couple of months suggest the days of the Juliet balcony are over,” says Clegg.

Where balconies are not economically feasible, for example in lower-priced units, communal outdoor areas will be vital.

“We already see developers introducing sheltered outdoor spaces such as podium and rooftop gardens, as well as traditional ground-floor-level communal gardens, which can be zoned to support social distancing,” says Ashton.

Ultimately, though, there’s only so much green space an inner-city apartment block can provide. With so many of us reconnecting with nature during the pandemic, could the golden rule that BTR schemes must be within striking distance of a station start to shift?

“Renters might be happy to walk an extra five or 10 minutes to the station if their apartment is next to a park,” says Clegg, while others go even further, suggesting Covid might be the catalyst for BTR to finally make its move out of the city.

Suburban BTR

“We’ve noticed there’s more appetite to live in suburban build-to-rent,” says Pedley, who envisions the rise of the “garden-style development, where amenities are housed in a centralised clubhouse, and there are individual houses and small apartment blocks in a parkland setting”.

Really, the debate about the future of BTR relies on making guesses about how quickly life might return to some kind of normality – and what that ‘new normal’ might look like.

Knee-jerk responses don’t seem like a good idea to me

Graham Bates, LIV Group

While there are plenty of ideas and lots of short-term tweaking of amenity space, no one is rushing to make sweeping long-term changes.

“Knee-jerk responses don’t seem like a good idea to me, when over the longer term Covid-19 will hopefully not be present,” says Bates.

Covid has been a reminder of the unpredictable factors the industry deals with when designing buildings, and how quickly things can change in the few years it takes for a floor plan to become a functioning building. These are things that are very difficult to plan for.

“If we change everything to make it fit-for-purpose to avoid contagion, then what’s the next thing to come along?” says Roberts. “It reminds me of when

the iPod came out and all the new cars were fitted with iPod jacks, and then three years later they were obsolete.”

The only way the sector can prepare for the future is to make sure buildings are adaptable and resilient. Those that don't rise to the challenge could find that in the new normal, their buildings are a whole lot less popular than they were in the old.