

Henderson luxury apartment complex builds wellness units

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Our homes give us shelter and a welcome refuge from the hectic outside world. But can they also make us healthier?

That's the question behind a new pilot program at a Henderson luxury apartment complex.

Packed with amenities like high-quality air purifiers and dawn-simulating lights, the 15 Elysian Well units at The Elysian at the District are aimed at health-conscious renters and designed in partnership with The Cleveland Clinic.

They're part of a national movement in wellness-oriented design that has drawn the support of such sustainable-living celebrities as Leonardo DiCaprio and Deepak Chopra. And while some experts scoff at the purported health benefits of aromatherapy dispensers and Vitamin C-infused shower heads, the 2-month old project is proving popular with renters.

"We hear a lot about green building, and it's an important focus," said Douglas Eisner, managing director at The Calida Group, which developed the complex. "But we heard that the average person spends 90 percent of their time indoors. We decided to create something more inward focused that would benefit the residents more directly."

Eisner spoke as he walked a reporter around one of the model wellness units, a two-bedroom home with a "Fifty Shades of Grey" theme. A RabbitAir particulate filter worked noiselessly in the background as Eisner demonstrated the Philips Hue lighting system. Operated by remote control or an app on the resident's phone, it can adjust brightness and color temperature — blue for energizing, or a calming orange that mimics the setting sun.

Sensors in the bedroom can tell when a resident gets up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night, automatically illuminating a string of soft floor lights to provide guidance without waking the person up too much.

Emulating natural light supports the body's natural circadian rhythms, leading to better sleep, said Dr. Michael Roizen, Chief Wellness Officer at The Cleveland Clinic. All the unit's extra bells and whistles — which also include water filters and an antimicrobial coating on countertops — are supported by science, he said.

Take the vitamin C dispenser on the shower head. While it might call to mind a fancy spa treatment, the reality is simpler, said Roizen: Vitamin C helps neutralize the chloride in the water, which can be toxic in high concentrations (and, less fatally, turn your skin dry).

Essential oils in the Ascents aromatherapy diffuser can enhance residents' moods, Roizen said, combating anxiety or boosting concentration — though he conceded that science is still evolving.

"No one knows for sure why aromas have such a powerful effect," he said. "Obviously, they do; that's how we find our mates. Is there hard data on its effectiveness? Yes. Do we know the mechanism of its effectiveness? No."

Renters pay an extra \$150 per month for the Elysian Well units. That's on top of rents that range from \$1,295 for a 730-square-foot one-bedroom to \$2,600 for a 1,500-square-foot townhome.

But Dr. James Craner, a Nevada occupational and environmental health specialist who often consults on air quality issues, said he doubts the amenities offered in the Elysian Well units will significantly improve residents' health.

“A standard building air-purification system cuts out all of the major particles that you could breathe,” he said.

As for the apartments’ other features, they amount to “repackaging the obvious,” he said. “Light is important, but you’re not going to make people healthier with dawn simulation. You live in Las Vegas; it’s sunny most of the year. Just walk outside. If you want to improve your circadian rhythm, go to sleep at the same time each night.

“All the information that people need to lead healthy lives is already available for free,” he added. “People just choose not to do it.”

Affecting people’s choices through the built environment is exactly the point, Roizen said. He compared the Elysian Well units to The Cleveland Clinic’s initiatives to remove sugared beverages from its buildings and add more staircases.

“Those are environmental changes that once you do them, you are more likely to eat healthier and do more walking, just because you changed the environment. Once you do it, it becomes almost automatic.”

Eisner and his business partner, Eric Cohen, had from the beginning incorporated environmentally friendly and health-conscious features into The Elysian at The District, which sits within walking distance of a Whole Foods Market and other shops and restaurants.

Residents can charge their electric cars in the parking area, or take advantage of free bike sharing and door-to-door recycling.

The gym, with its heavy drapes and plush purple carpet, feels more like a boutique hotel lounge than a sterile workout space, and comes with onsite personal trainers and massage therapists.

“We’re attracting a lot of fitness-minded residents — they’re eating organic, walking to and from dinner instead of driving,” Eisner said.

In a twist on a classic developer’s strategy, the Elysian team upped the appeal of some of the complex’s less-desirable units — those in a building near the freeway — by converting them to wellness apartments.

While potential renters might worry about the air quality in that building, “we flipped it on its head: Not only is it healthy to live there, but you’re going to be even healthier (than in the other buildings),” Eisner said.

For about \$5,000, Eisner and Cohen can turn any apartment at The Elysian at The District into an Elysian Well unit, and a waitlist is already growing. Eisner said he plans to expand the program to The Calida Group’s other Elysian communities around the Las Vegas Valley. The suburban oases target upper-income professionals who can afford to buy a high-rise condominium but choose to rent instead.

Jeramie Green, 44, said the wellness amenities weren’t the deciding factor when he downsized from a house to a two-bedroom Elysian Well unit in April, but “they’re definitely nice to have.”

“This is going to sound corny, but the alarm clock is pretty badass,” he said, referring to a built-in clock that gradually increases light in the room just before the alarm is set to go off, creating the feeling of a natural dawn. “I wake up better. I just do.”

A branch manager at an electrical distributor and self-described “high-strung guy,” Green said he also uses the lighting system to wind down at night. “When I feel myself a little stressed out, I will set those lights to relax. I put the scent in, too.”

Helping tenants like Green lead healthier lives is a logical extension of the “smart home” concept, in which technology enhances our quality of life, said Attila Lawrence, an architecture professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and head of a new Master of Healthcare Interior Design program the university is launching this year.

“Building interiors are crucial to the success of personalized ‘virtual health,’ such as telehealth and remote monitoring,” Lawrence said via email. “Developers who invest in well-being are beginning to see returns on their investments such as more productive, collaborative and creative workers.”

The company chose the MGM Grand to debut its Stay Well hotel rooms, which rely on technology similar to the Elysian Well units. Marriott now plans to apply the concept to a handful of its properties across the southeastern United States.

“The real success will be if it has catalyzed the understanding in this country that we’ve got to stop the influx of chronic disease, and one of the key ways is to create an environment that facilitates health,” he said.

Green has a more personal perspective. Since moving into his Elysian Well unit, he’s noticed that his dust allergies have improved, and he no longer has to spend money on bottled water.

“I would bet that my mood is better, my health is better,” he said. “But I can’t prove it.”

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