

Going to the Dogs: Pet Suites Becoming Common Features in New Homes

By Camilla McLaughlin *New Home Source* – September 2014

You could say some open houses are going to the dogs.

At least that was the case for Standard Pacific Homes' grand opening of a new community in Brea, Calif., where canines, as well as their humans, lined up to preview pet suites being offered as an option in the homes.

Consumers want homes that facilitate lifestyle, that make the everyday easier and better and this vision likely includes the family dog or cat. "It's something buyers take into consideration now," says Rhona Sutter, a Naples, Fla., real estate agent who founded the Pet Realty Network in 2007. "Whatever people want for their pets, they are going to get."

Part of the Family

Phil Kean, owner of the Phil Kean Design Group in Winter Park, Fla., agrees. "Having pets, I have always thought about them during the design process," shares Kean, named the National Association of Home Builders' 2013 National Custom Home Builder of the Year. Pet considerations are included on Kean's initial check list of wants and needs. "People love their pets but not their mess. I try to make it better."

Surprisingly, multifamily developers are leading the pet bandwagon. Understanding that many potential buyers would be moving from the suburbs, developers of the Austonian — a luxury high-rise building in downtown Austin that opened in 2010 — included a 600-square-foot dog park (and an indoor grooming salon) as part of an outdoor amenity area located on the 10th floor.

Today in almost every urban setting, buildings, particularly luxury high rises, are including features and perks ranging from areas purposed for dog walking and dog parks to grooming studios to yappy hours and special events. Even new luxury rental buildings often incorporate grooming areas for pets as developers continue to refine ways to ensure their buildings match consumer expectations. "Today's consumers have more pets than children," says Mollie Carmichael, a principal with John Burns Real Estate Consulting, which provides independent housing research, advice and consulting.

How Many Pets?

Approximately 68 percent of U.S. households own a pet, according to the American Pet Products Association. And dog parks are preferred over all the parks, even over children's parks. "This is absolutely new," says Carmichael.

Earlier this year, national homebuilder Standard Pacific Homes introduced pet suites as an option in 27 of their 190 communities across the country, a first for a large residential builder. The concept grew out of livability studies conducted with homeowners. Danielle Tocco, Standard Pacific's director of communications, says a theme that really resonated was how important pets are to families. In fact, the American Veterinary Medical society tells us that six out of 10 owners consider their pet to be a family member.

Standard Pacific's offerings range from a basic 50-square-foot suite — a separate room with an easy step-in wash station and storage cabinets — to an ultra-indulgent 170-square-foot space with customized cabinetry for toys, food and treats. Just in case Fido or Fifi gets bored, there is a flat-screen TV and a posh bed to stretch out on. Every suite incorporates lots of features that make it easier for homeowners to care for their pets, according to Tocco. "We are happy to be able to provide the suites as an option for owners. A lot of thought went into the space. It was a

collaborative effort between our employees.” Prices for the pet suites range from about \$8,000 to \$30,000. All are separate rooms, which can be adapted to other uses if a future owner does not have a pet.

Do Pets Really Need a Separate Space?

Having a separate space for pets might become even more important for some families. “People are looking for ways to keep pets from certain rooms,” says Sutter. “It’s not just the typical 2.3 people in an average family ... you also have to take the extended family into consideration and most people don’t want their elderly mother taken out by a Bernese mountain dog.”

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“Our washing stations are convenient for homeowners and their pets,” says Costa. “They’re like little showers. They’re raised to a convenient height, so you don’t have to bend down to wash your pet. They even have an area for food and water dishes for added convenience.”

The initial offering as an option for Grenadier’s new Watermere community in Southlake, Texas, has been so successful that Costa says they are looking to expand the option to other communities: “Everyone I’ve talked to absolutely loves it. There’s definitely a demand for it.”

Kitchen designers say they are getting more requests for spaces for pets, including niches for crates, beds, feeding dishes, even litter boxes, as well as for areas to organize food and accessories. The 2014 National Kitchen & Bath Association’s Kitchen & Bath Design Trends report singled out accommodating pets as a new trend.

Individual manufacturers are also jumping into the pet arena. MTI Baths just introduced what is dubbed as “a dedicated bathing station,” available as a soaker or as a pet whirlpool. Extra insulation makes it quiet and integrated shelves store essentials such as towels, shampoo and treats.

Kean says his most requested amenity is an electronic dog or cat door, which opens in response to a magnetic key on the pet’s collar and otherwise remains shut, keeping four-legged and other intruders out. Owners can program times to allow access for their pets. Each key is unique and owners can even view when their pet used the door.

The ultimate amenity? Sutter says it’s an outdoor shower. Not surprisingly, Kean, an architect, says it is dog houses that match the architecture of the main house.
Camilla McLaughlin is a writer specializing in house and home. Her work has appeared in leading online and print publications, such as Yahoo! Real Estate, Unique Homes magazine and Realtor Magazine. She has also freelanced for the Associated Press.