

7 TIPS FOR DESIGNING ATTRACTIVE BUILD-TO-RENT HOMES AND COMMUNITIES

Two residential architects share their best practices for creating sought-after BTR communities for today's renters.

By [Symone Strong](#)



Courtesy Zonda

Four years ago, 72% of the population thought it was a good time to buy a house. Today, according to Zonda principal Mollie Carmichael, only 25% feel that way, signaling many would-be buyers are looking to rent.

“That’s a huge opportunity,” she stated during one of her panels at the recent Zonda Build-to-Rent conference. “You’re definitely in the right room for build-to-rent (BTR).”

In the Demographics, Demand Drivers, and Design Evolution session, Carmichael was joined on stage by residential architects Garrett Hoskins, principal at Robert Hidey Architects, and Mike Cantrell, senior principal at WHA Architects Planners Designers, to discuss how demographic shifts and burgeoning demand in the sector have impacted the design of BTR homes and communities.

“There’s so many different styles they want,” said Carmichael. “There’s so many things that they’re looking at.”

To help narrow down the options, Hoskins and Cantrell presented some of their recent BTR home designs—alongside Carmichael’s demographic data—and shared the following tips for creating BTR communities that renters will love.

Add timeless qualities: Although people have been trending more modern, Hoskins said to make the homes timeless. “We can put more design emphasis in a house if we’re willing to use scissor trusses to pop out the roof. So it looks like it’s been built over time,” he said. “It’s rich quality detailing with simple architecture, and it creates something where people love to live there.”

Create front porch living: Both architects emphasized how front porches engage the street. “We have a big focus on front porch living and bringing residents out to the front of their houses,” stated Hoskins. “It creates community by engaging with all the dog walkers, etc. In a way, it creates this fantastic place to live.”

Be diverse in style: According to Carmichael, over 70% of consumers want diversity in home styles within a single community. “They don’t want to have to count to get to their house,” she said. The architects agreed and showcased designs with various façades, different setbacks, and motor court options.

Consider paseos or motor courts: Essentially a dedicated walkway, paseos can tie a community together and “gives you a way to let your kids run to their friend’s house without worrying about them crossing streets,” shared Hoskins. “It’s a great way to create safe places and walk dogs.” There’s also been a rise in the use of motor courts or small cul-de-sacs. The architects said this gets garages off the street, adds that diversity, and allows residents to use the courts as gathering areas.

Don’t forget privacy: With constraining lots and city-required densities, sometimes these detached communities become more attached in ways. If they do, the panelists emphasized finding some sort of privacy for the units. “It’s all about privacy. It’s about walls touching,” stated Carmichael. “So anywhere you do townhomes or clusters, just create privacy and make it feel like it’s detached.”

Bring city living to suburbia: Many of today’s BTR communities are being constructed in the suburbs and taking people away from their short walk to coffee shops or their corner grab-and-go market. “You’re compromising all of those things you had while living within a city, the walkability to a store, a cafe, a market,” said Hoskins. “In Irvine, [California](#), we did a grab-and-go. It’s awesome because you can go there and grab a six-pack of beer and take it to the pool.”

Be pet-friendly: Carmichael said “these consumers are actually going to have more pets than children. So don’t forget that.” She reiterated that dog parks do rate well, but no one wants to live next to one. If the dog park is omitted, be thinking about those paseos, walking trails, and green spaces for furry friends.