WHITE PAPER

The Renewal Premium

How Lobby and Amenity Design Wins the Lease, Earns the Renewal, and Protects Multifamily NOI

Neuroscience, Clinical Evidence, and the Case for Evidence-Based Specification

Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

Multifamily competition has moved. A decade ago, Class A communities competed on unit finishes and location. Today, with amenity checklists nearly identical across competing properties, the contest has shifted to the experience of shared space: the lobby that opens every leasing tour, the lounge where residents actually spend time, the amenity floor that justifies the rent and quietly argues for the renewal. The largest study of renter preferences in the industry, the NMHC and Grace Hill Renter Preferences Survey of more than 172,000 renters across 4,220 communities, documents an audience whose expectations of community amenities are rising, including a near-doubling of interest in shared workspaces as remote work reshapes how residents use their buildings. [1]

The financial stakes of this competition are measured at two moments in the resident lifecycle. The first is the lease decision, formed substantially in the opening minutes of a tour, in spaces ownership controls completely. The second is the renewal decision, where the economics are unforgiving: the National Apartment Association places the average cost of turning a single unit at approximately $3,782, before accounting for vacancy loss and the leasing effort required to replace the departed resident. [2] Renewal is the highest-margin event in multifamily operations, and the industry's own research shows that a substantial share of move-outs is driven by something ownership can control: residents leaving in search of better community amenities elsewhere. [3]

This paper presents the case that biophilic design, the integration of natural elements and materials that the human nervous system recognizes as calming and restorative, is uniquely suited to both moments. Residential is the only building type whose occupants return to recover rather than to perform, and the science of restoration gives nature a role in the experience of home that no other design element documented to date can claim. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory established that natural environments engage attention effortlessly and allow the brain's directed-attention capacity to recover. [4] Roger Ulrich's Stress Recovery Theory demonstrated that natural stimuli accelerate physiological recovery from stress activation. [5] Both mechanisms apply at the moment a resident crosses the lobby threshold, which is the moment the building either reinforces or undercuts the decision to renew.

Key Evidence

172,000+ Renters	Surveyed in the NMHC/Grace Hill Renter Preferences Study across 4,220 communities [1]
$3,782 Avg.	Cost to turn a single multifamily unit (National Apartment Association) [2]
Amentity Gap	A documented driver of move-outs ownership can directly address [3]
20+ Year Lifespan	Preserved botanical installations vs. 6-8 years for commercial-grade faux

The Three-Way Comparison

Most citizens never read a budget report or a performance scorecard. The DMV counter, courthouse corridor, and permitting office are the only government most people ever touch in person, and the room shapes how competent that government appears to be. Procedural justice research shows people judge legitimacy by the fairness of process, not just outcome, and the physical environment is part of that process.

Criteria	Living Walls	Faux Greenery	Preserved Botanical
Maintenance	High: irrigation, lighting, horticulture	Low: periodic dusting	None: no water, light, or service
Residential Fit	Authentic but operationally complex	Reads as artificial on close inspection	Authentic, permanent appearance
Lifespan	Dependent on service contract	6-8 years (commercial grade)	20+ years, 7-year warranty
Humidity/HVAC	Requires supplemental systems	No special requirements	No special requirements
Certifications	Varies widely	Rarely third-party verified	HPD, Declare, CDPH, ASTM E84, EPD

The Lobby as Renewal Instrument

The lobby is where the leasing tour begins and where the resident returns every day. Research on first impressions in built environments documents that judgments formed in the first seconds of entry persist and resist revision. [6] In multifamily, this means the lobby is simultaneously the most powerful marketing tool ownership controls and the daily renewal argument that runs for the entire length of every lease.

Biophilic installations in lobby and amenity spaces serve the restoration science directly. The resident arriving home after a demanding day is in precisely the state that Ulrich's stress recovery research and the Kaplans' attention restoration research describe: sympathetic nervous system activation, depleted directed attention, and a documented need for environmental stimuli that do not demand cognitive effort. A preserved garden in the lobby delivers exactly the passive, effortless engagement the science identifies as restorative. [4]

"The lobby is not the entrance to the building. It is the first room of the resident's home. It should feel like one."

Garden on the Wall® Standard

Garden on the Wall® maintains the most comprehensive third-party verification portfolio in the preserved botanical category: HPD v2.3 at 100 ppm full-system disclosure, Declare Red List Free, CDPH Section 01350, ASTM E84 Class A whole-system without added fire retardants, and a cradle-to-grave EPD with negative cradle-to-gate embodied carbon. The company has completed more than 1,900 installations exceeding 186,000 square feet, serving more than 60 Fortune 500 clients across more than 460 award-winning projects, with a 7-year warranty and 20+ year expected lifespan.

7-year Warranty
Industry-leading coverage

20+ year Lifecycle
Lowest total cost of ownership

Zero Maintenance
No Water, light, or care required

Complete Verification
EPD • HPD • VOC • Red List Free • ASTM E84

Download the full white paper with complete research citations, detailed ROI calculations, and implementation guidance at gardenonthewall.com. Request samples through Material Bank · CEU available through Architectural Record's Continuing Education Center (AIA/IDCEC/GBCI accredited)