

Of Human Bonding

Condo dwellers find cool ways to connect with the neighbors

Tatyana Schum was single, 30, and looking for new friends. So she decided to take action. No, she didn't sign up for "speed friending," hit MySpace or join a book club. Instead, she organized a condo crawl through her Park Fairfax neighborhood near Shirlington. Now, a couple of times a year, Schum and her fellow Alexandrians spend an hour socializing at one condo owner's house, sharing everything from gardening tips to decorating ideas. They then move on to a kind of roving party at several other neighbors' condos that continues until late in the evening.



Midtown Lofts at Reston Town Center boasts a shared art room where residents can paint, sculpt and be otherwise creative.

"I wanted to meet people," she said. "It seemed that there were so many young, single people in my neighborhood. And they were right there. But I didn't want to exclude anyone. It seemed natural to have the whole community involved."

Schum's desire to meet her neighbors is not surprising. In a metro area where 10-hour-plus workdays are the norm and many people come from somewhere other than here, it's difficult to find the time or the means to develop friendships. "There are a lot of people out there who are staying single longer and not having kids until later," said Tony Longo of condodomain.com, an Internet marketing company that serves the real-estate industry. "That doesn't mean they want to be alone. Think about it — [in a condo] you have 500 neighbors that are less than 50 yards from you."

For years, developers have provided amenities that make condo living more convenient and comfortable, filling their high-rises

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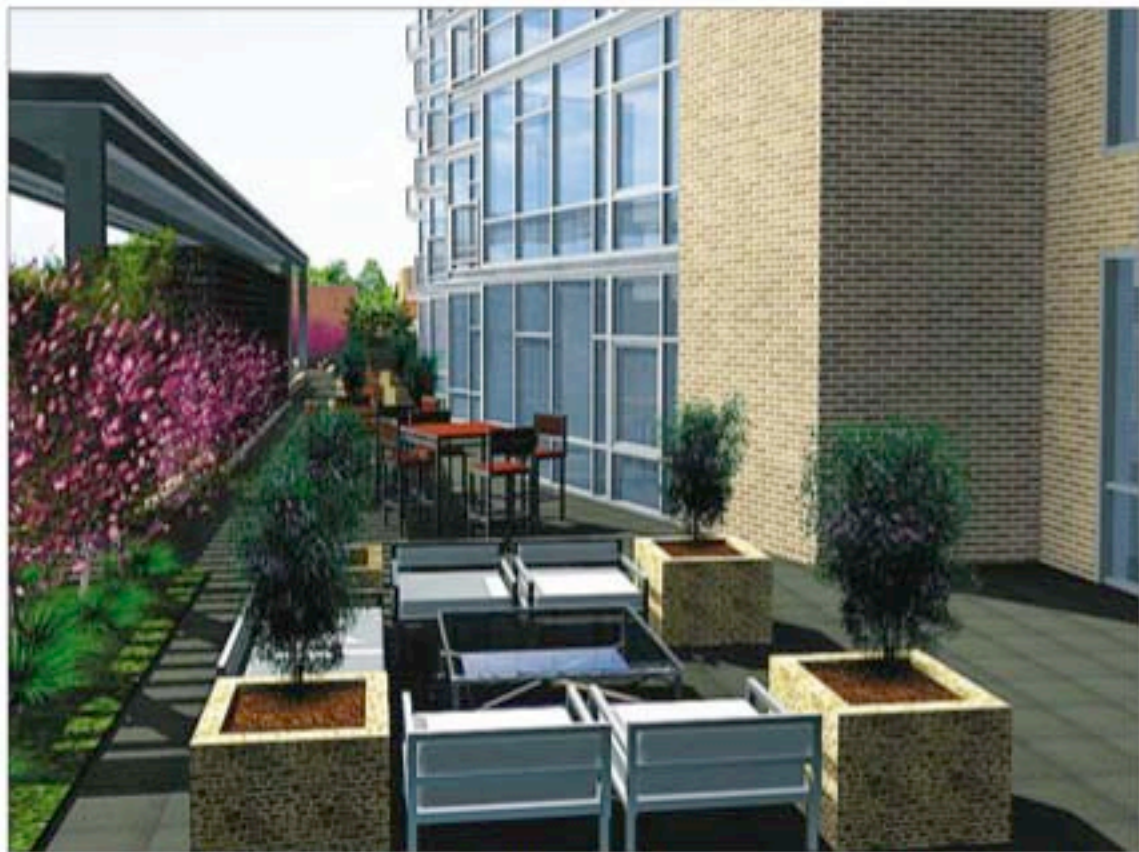
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and town house communities with everything from mini-marts and dry cleaners to tennis courts and swimming pools. Now, in addition to creating self-contained, luxe buildings, developers are intentionally including features that encourage neighbors to get together in social settings.

But these efforts go way beyond installing typical community rooms. For example, Level 2 Development's View 14 condos at 14th Street Northwest will provide access to both heaven and Earth. Well, perhaps not literally — but when the 170-unit U Street corridor property delivers in 2008, it will boast a rooftop observation deck and a Zen garden.

Said David Franco, principal at Level 2 Development, "Residents can gather together on the rooftop to enjoy sunsets." And like any shared space, the über-deck may help neighbors connect. "Anyplace that gets people relaxed will foster conversation and put them in the frame of mind to get to know one



SERENITY, LATER: When buyers move into View 14 in 2008, they'll enjoy a stylish (and possibly sociable) rooftop Zen garden.

another," said Franco.

Midtown Lofts at Reston Town Center features a studio workroom to encourage residents to pursue arts and crafts in the company of their neighbors. Think of it as summer camp for grown-ups, with all the attendant bonding possibilities. "It is not just for art, but [also] for woodworking and other projects," said Jamie Gorski, chief marketing officer for KSI Services Inc. "Residents will meet others with similar interests, and that will likely lead to friendships."

At the Colonnade at Kentlands in Gaithersburg, condo owners can meet at Max's Pub, a hangout with a funky concrete floor and an industrial look. Despite the decor, it's still a bar, with typical after-5 p.m. activities. Diversions include foosball and pool tables, TVs (often turned to sporting events) and a wine-tasting room with a double-sided fireplace. Just outside the door, there's even a more typical condo perk: a courtyard pool.

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Developers realize that these types of spaces amount to more than mere rooms. "We have a sense that we are creating communities. We're not just building buildings," Franco said. "It's more than giving everyone a door and a key."

At the same time, their motives aren't purely altruistic. "People look at these amenities before they purchase," Franco said. "We're trying to give people what they want."

"There's a product for everyone out there today," said Longo. "Just three or four years ago, the buildings were all the same. They offered the same amenities and the same look and feel. Today, each one being developed is unique, from the location, to the look and feel. The people that are living there almost make the building."

But developers aren't the only ones who want to foster a sense of community. Condo dwellers do, too.

At Williamsburg Condominiums in Arlington, the condo associa-



YOU SHOULD SEE THE NEIGHBORS: Dozens of Park Fairfax residents chat and drink during a semiannual "condo crawl."

tion coordinates an annual charity drive during the winter holidays, adopting a needy family through Arlington County. The association manages the logistics and the residents donate cash or other items. Association Manager Suzanne Till said the activity helps bring residents closer because they connect while working together to help others.

"It's giving back," she said. "It

makes this more of a community."

Most condo associations throw a holiday party in the community room, or perhaps kick off the summer with a pool party. But in many cases, association-led social events are disappearing as residents choose to gather according to their own schedules and interests. Among the popular ways to get together:

book groups, progressive-dinner clubs and even exercise classes.

"In urban settings, most of the people are so busy [they] don't have time to think about or enjoy a community event," said Longo. "They're coming home after a long day. They want to get together when it's good for them."

That's true at Williamsburg Condominiums, where the resi-

dents initiated their own yoga classes.

"The residents spearheaded the class," said Till. "This is what they wanted and it fits their schedule, so they organized it, and now a dozen neighbors get together every week for yoga."

No matter who or what brings them together — developers, associations or other residents — condo owners seem to like getting to know their neighbors. The condo crawl that Schum created at Park Fairfax in 2003 started with about 60 residents. It has more than doubled to include 140 people, and it's held twice a year due to its popularity.

Did it produce the results she wanted? You bet. Schum recently vacationed with a new friend whom she met during a condo crawl. "I think, especially when I became a homeowner, I needed a sense of community. But there wasn't one," she said. "I kept seeing people every day but I didn't know them at all. Now, some of my very best friends are my neighbors." LYNN THORNE