

# More building residents seek a custom fit

By Jane Adler  
Special to the Tribune

Moving to a retirement building doesn't necessarily mean settling for a plain-vanilla apartment.

Don and Marilyn Hollis, for example, plan to move to the Clare at Water Tower, a high-rise continuing-care building under construction just off Michigan Avenue. Instead of taking one of the standard units, they're combing three on the 33rd floor. The huge 4,300-square-foot space will include a guest suite with two bedrooms that connects to the kitchen and breakfast area. On the other side of the unit, the master suite features his-and-her bathrooms and a workout room.

The Hollises wanted a big place to host their grandchildren, the main reason they are staying in the area. And besides having enough space for comfortable visits, the unit also offers a lot of privacy. "We wanted to make it hospitable for guests," said Don Hollis, a business consultant.

But size isn't the couple's only

consideration. Owners of a very modern custom home in Arizona that they plan to sell, the Hollises wanted a less traditional apartment than what the building offers. They worked with an architect to design an open floor plan with a 40-foot entry hall to showcase their modern art. They also selected wood floors and high-end appliances. "We plan to live there 20 years. So we want it the way we want it," said Don Hollis.

Retirement buildings do allow residents to customize their apartments—to an extent. Many new buildings offer a menu of options for interior finishes, such as kitchen cabinets and flooring. Truly custom changes cost more.

The Hollis' will spend \$300,000 to change their unit. That's on top of the \$3 million entrance fee, most of which is refunded when the unit is released.

Of course, the extensive changes being made by the Hollises are the exception. Most residents of retirement buildings simply select a certain carpet color or door type. But

standard options are becoming more plentiful. Some developers will even share in the cost of non-standard upgrades to boost sales.

At Smith Crossing in southwest suburban Orland Park, for example, the developer will pay part of the costs for upgrades for duplex cottages still available.

The Admiral, a longtime retirement community on Chicago's North Side, is being rebuilt. Residents will have the choice of five interior packages, including granite countertops and tile floors. Developer Greystone Communities, of Irving, Texas, plans to have a "personalization coordinator" on staff early next year to help residents "finish" their apartments. Residents also can visit [www.select-finish.com](http://www.select-finish.com) to see how the finishes look.

"We want to show people the options," said Gene Hooton, senior manager of development at Greystone, which is also handling development duties at the Clare. About 20 units at the Clare will be highly customized, Hooton added, a large number for a retirement building.

Retirement buildings, especially those in urban areas, are turning to customization to compete with traditional condos, Hooton said.

The Hollises, for example, spent a year looking at condos downtown, which they could craft the way they wanted. But they eventually decided they didn't want to have to move again if their health became an issue. The Clare addresses that concern with assisted-living and nursing-care units. Marilyn Hollis said that was attractive because they had a difficult time with one of their parents who refused to move. "I didn't want my own children to go through that," she said.

But there is a hitch: Customized units may have to be returned to their original state at the resident's expense. Though many big retirement buildings charge an entrance fee, the resident is not actually buying a unit—they are really renters. As such, the contract requires the unit to be returned to its original state if it cannot be released within a reasonable time period. If an entrance-fee refund



A Shedd-style apartment at The Admiral, which is adding a "personalization coordinator" to its staff early next year to help residents customize their units.

is due the resident, the changes needed to bring the unit back to its original state will be deducted from it. (Entrance fees are not returned until the unit is re-leased.) It should be noted that this stipulation doesn't usually apply to ordinary wear and tear.

Most residents keep changes to a minimum to avoid a big tab, Hooton said. "The [standard] options we offer are nice and most people find them acceptable."

Don Hollis isn't worried about having to break up his big apartment at the Clare. He thinks the changes will make

the unit among the premiere retirement spots in the city and easy to re-lease.

"If you were buying a house, you wouldn't hesitate to upgrade it," he said, adding "By the time the kids resell this, they will do fine."

Jane Adler is a Chicago-area freelance writer. Write to her at Senior Housing, c/o Chicago Tribune Real Estate, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. Or e-mail [realestate@tribune.com](mailto:realestate@tribune.com). Sorry, she cannot make personal replies. Answers will be supplied only through the newspaper.