

Designing for an aging population

By John C. Durham

Face it: You're getting

older. So am I. As an aging baby boomer, I'm now designing for "us," not "them." Yikes! I'm one of them!

It's only natural that as baby boomers age and become a larger percentage of the population, the building industry responds with a variety of new housing alternatives, from entire communities to individual buildings. No matter the scale of your project, you must consider certain design elements. First, some assumptions.

We are healthier and living longer.

Not only are people living longer, but the aging population is adopting healthier lifestyle habits as well. This has a myriad of implications for our industry – from recycling of existing housing stock to creative solutions for new housing. Rather than simply selling the family homestead and moving into an institution, people may choose from a variety of housing options, ranging from active adult communities to assisted and independent living, from congregate care to senior day care.

Our lifestyles are different.

Planners and builders have to look beyond their own lifestyles and choices to recognize that the diversity of our aging population mandates varying housing alternatives for varying markets. While an active adult community might be ideal for some, it's not perfect for all. Not all of us are looking to retire to golf course communities.

Our kids aren't going to care for us.

When we do age to the point of requiring assistance, the option many seniors had of moving in with one of their children isn't as prevalent as it once was. Single-person households or

those where both adults are breadwinners doesn't bode well for an aging adult in need of care and assistance. Hence, the rise of assisted living housing.

How do these assumptions translate into design considerations?

Site planning

The physical nature and health of your target group will have important implications on your project's design. This is true for the entire spectrum of housing opportunities,

from free-standing single family homes in active adult communities to shared rooms in more institutional settings.

More attention must be paid to the overall site topography and grading and how these translate into the "walkability" of a project. Many seniors rely on walking as their primary form of recreation. Generally, we think of walking as limited to the great outdoors, but as we've learned from the popularity of seniors walking in shopping malls, weather, safety and other factors contribute to increased indoor walking.

One retirement community that we work with has even connected all of its buildings with heated and cooled linkages, allowing residents to walk literally miles without going outside. Another consideration is the width of exterior walks. They should be wide enough for two seniors



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and any mechanical assistance they may require.

Generally, seniors drive fewer cars and make fewer auto trips. Many retirement communities furnish on-site activities and services, further diminishing the need for autos. This all translates into reduced need for on-site parking and increased leverage for challenging roadway impact fees or special transportation fees related to a population that is more auto-dependent.

On-site parking needs to conform to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines for accessibility and must be close to community amenities. Because handicapped parking requirements are based on the general population, designers may want to increase the provision of these spaces as a percentage of the total.

While entitling an assisted living project here in Denver, I was worried that we didn't have enough distance from the adjacent major arterial street. But the client told me that the closer we could get the living units to the street, the better – senior residents actually thrived on the activity and noise of passing traffic.

Landscape

For many seniors, gardening and the enjoyment of landscape are hobbies they want to continue long into their golden years. These activities translate into a wide range of potential amenities, including small balconies or patios, community garden plots, private courtyards and campuslike settings with walking trails. What it generally does not include are large, high-maintenance yards so common to the homes many emerging seniors are leaving behind.

Landscape species selected to attract birds, butterflies and wildlife offer hours of enjoyment to seniors and also contribute to an enriched environment. Planners should choose species that provide year-round color and interest.

Parks and open space

City and county open space requirements are generally based on a much younger and more active population. This reason alone validates the importance of customizing an open space area and recreation program specific to the needs of seniors. The demands put on the local park system are just not going to be as burdensome as a mainstream, family-oriented population. Also, if the facilities have their own recreational amenities, many will argue that recreational needs will be met on-site; this can serve as leverage for reduced parkland requirements or reduced cash-in-lieu of parkland.

Summary

The senior housing market is as broad as the population itself. Therefore, it's impossible to make sweeping generalizations that will work in every design. What



is important to remember is that you are dealing with a mature audience with sophisticated and specialized needs. Anything we can do as design professionals to bring interest, convenience, mobility and beauty to senior housing alternatives will enhance the livability of the project and the quality of life for its residents. 🏠

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